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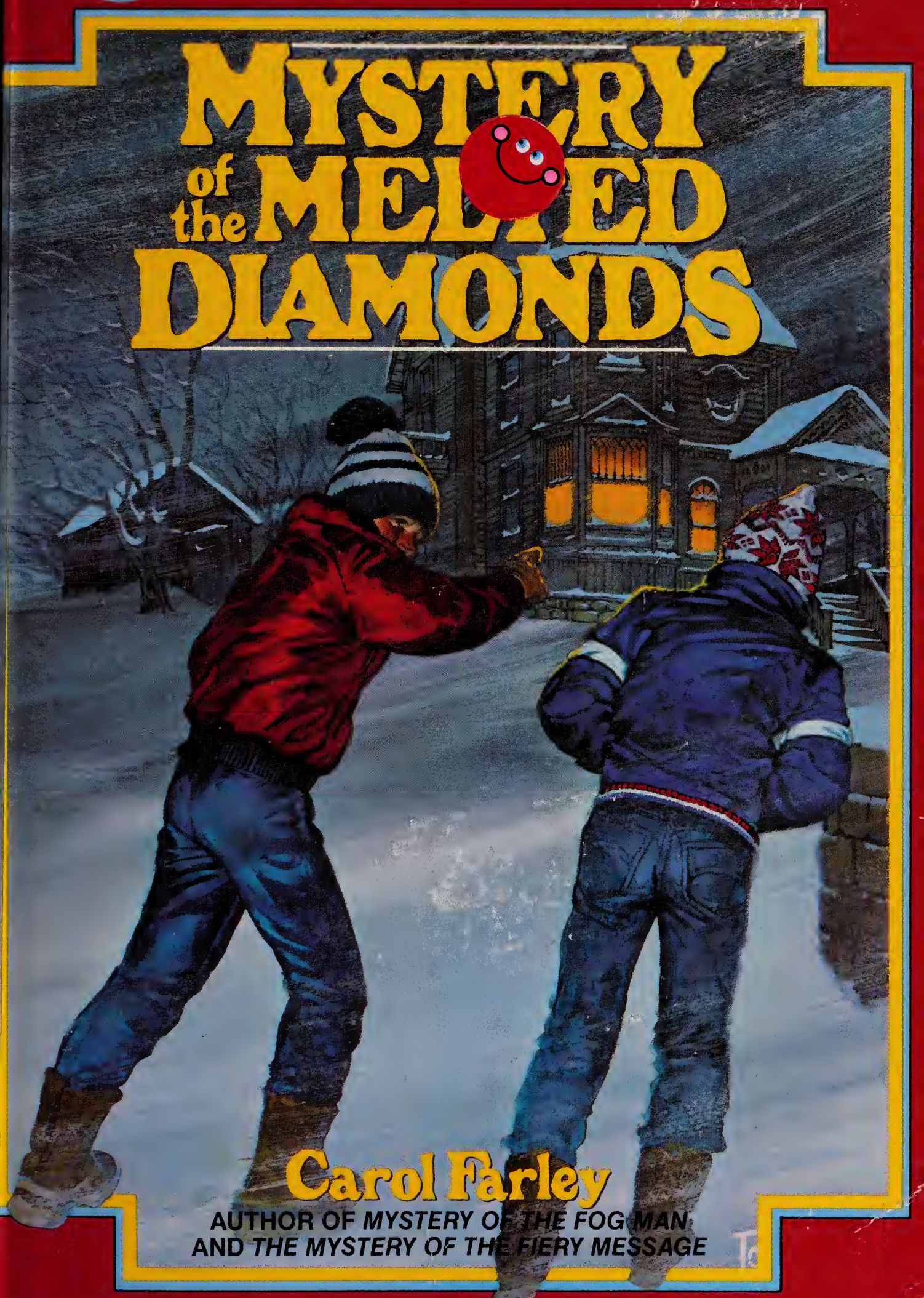

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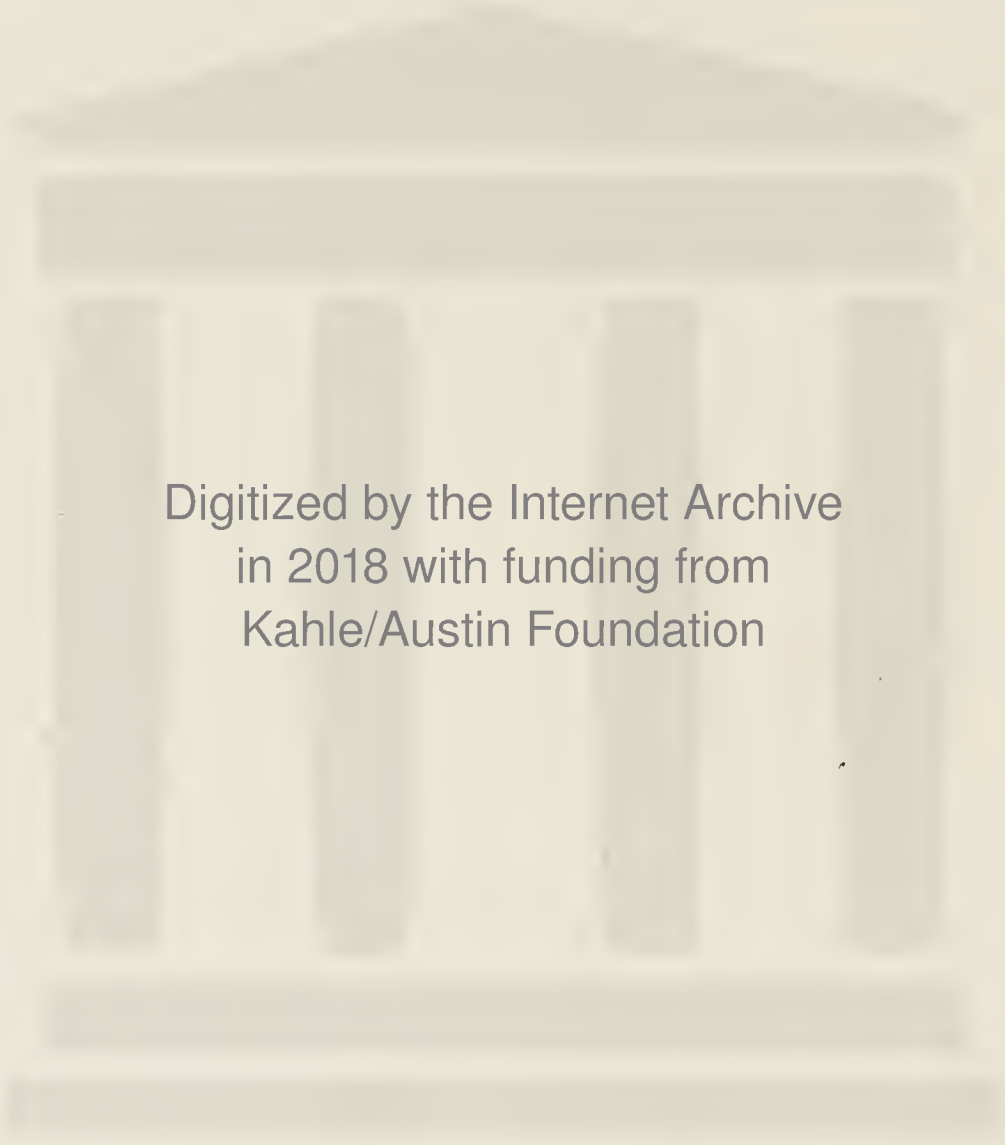
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Carol Farley

Illustrated by Tom Newsom

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

This book is for
May and Doug Farley—
Happy Anniversary on your
50th—
We're planning to give you
real diamonds on your
60th!

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1790 Broadway
New York, New York 10019

Copyright © 1986 by Carol Farley
Published by arrangement with the author
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-47830
ISBN: 0-380-89865-9
RL: 4.3

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For information address Gloria Mosesson, 290 West End Avenue,
New York, New York 10023.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farley, Carol J.
Mystery of the melted diamonds.

(An Avon Camelot book)
Summary: Kipper and his cousin Larry get caught in a Kansas snowstorm and become involved in the search for diamonds stolen from a jewelry store in town.
[1. Kansas—Fiction. 2. Robbers and outlaws—Fiction. 3. Mystery and detective stories]
I. Newsom, Tom, ill. II. Title.
PZ7.F233Myh 1986 [Fic] 85-47830

First Camelot Printing, January 1986

CAMELOT TRADEMARK REG. U. S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U. S. A.

Printed in the U. S. A.

OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

CHAPTER ONE

"Watch out!" Larry yelled, grabbing my arm and yanking me over to the side of the road. A car came barreling out of the darkness and I saw silver fenders flash within inches of where I was standing.

"Are you crazy, Kipper?" Larry pointed at the taillights disappearing in the distance. "You nearly got killed!"

"I never even saw it," I mumbled, wiping snow from my face. "There's hardly ever any traffic along here."

"Well, there was traffic now. That car was zooming along like a rocket and you were right in its path." Larry steadied himself in the howling winds. "I've been thinking for the last ten minutes that we're going to die along this road, but I thought it would be the storm that finished us off—not some speed demon."

I couldn't see his face, but I could tell that Larry was frowning, and I had to admit that he had good reason for being mad. We'd left Grandville half an hour before, and now the storm was getting worse and worse as we walked along. The snow was falling fast and furious and the temperature was dropping. The wind was whipping and howling all around us. It was nearly

seven o'clock, and we were stumbling along in darkness. There weren't any street lights on Kansas country roads like there were on the streets of Larry's hometown back in Michigan.

"What do you think, Cousin?" he shouted. "Think we should go back to Grandville?"

I clenched my fists inside my wet gloves. "No. I told Scooter we were going home, and so we are." I turned and started walking against the wind again. "We'll make it home okay. It's less than two miles from here."

"Two miles!" Larry's big boots plodded along beside me. "We never should have left town in the middle of a blizzard."

"It wasn't a blizzard when we left," I reminded him. We stumbled along in silence, then, shivering and huddling down into our jackets, fighting through the biting wind.

I was sure I knew what Larry was thinking. He was probably sorry that he had agreed to visit me while his dad went to a police convention in Florida. Visiting him up in Michigan was always great for me, but I could see how boring it had to be for him at my house. He was the only son of the chief of police in Ludington and something exciting was always happening to him. I was just one of four sons of a farm family in Kansas, and nothing exciting ever happened to me. I'd wanted to show him a good time on his first visit to meet my family, so I'd made plans to spend some time in town. It was because of those plans that we were stuck out in the blizzard now.

"You shouldn't have had that fight with Scooter," he yelled at me suddenly.

So I knew he was thinking the same thoughts that were whirling around in my own head. Just after lunch that day, I'd told him that we were going to town so he

could meet my friend Scooter. Both Mom and Scooter's mother said we could spend the night.

I guess Scooter wanted to show off for Larry, because he'd started acting really dumb. Finally I'd told him we'd had enough and Larry and I were leaving. It hadn't been snowing then, so Larry and I'd gone to the bowling alley for a while. By the time we'd left there, the snow had started. Now it was coming down harder and faster and the wind was howling.

"If you hadn't had that big fight with Scooter we'd be back at his house playing a warm game of Trivial Pursuit right now," Larry shouted.

"You're the one who wanted to bowl a second game," I yelled back. "If we'd left for home right away, we would have been there by now."

He knew I was right. Larry can't stand to lose, so after I'd won that first game, he wanted to bowl another.

"Guess I forgot how far it was to your house," he muttered. "Wish we could have called your mom."

"You know Dad has the car in Kansas City," I shouted. "And the truck's in the garage. Mom thinks we're staying all night at Scooter's."

"And Scooter's mom thinks we're safe at your house," Larry shouted back. "So we're stuck out here in the middle of a blizzard and nobody even knows." He hesitated a second, and then he went on. "I couldn't believe it when you got so mad back there."

"Scooter was cheating." It was getting harder to talk. My mouth felt stiff from the cold.

"But you always seem so easygoing when you visit me. Dad says he wishes I could be more like you."

I nearly tripped over my boots at that idea. Uncle Matt wanted Larry to be like me? What a joke that was! We were about as different as two people could

be. Larry is always full of fun and good ideas, whereas I'm usually quiet and boring. He's tall and redheaded; I'm short, with hair color the shade of mud. It was hard for me to believe that our mothers had been sisters, and even harder for me to imagine that Uncle Matt wanted us to be more alike.

Larry lowered his head and tried to walk faster. "Wish another car would come along. Think that silver one was at your house?"

"I never saw it before, but we *are* the only people living on this road. Maybe the driver was lost. He sure didn't have any interest in helping us. Couldn't have been from around here."

The wind seemed to howl even louder then, whipping up waves of snow. I stumbled on the icy road and caught my breath. Pain shot through my chest as the freezing air hit my lungs. Half an hour before, in the dim twilight, the snow had been a pure white boulder breaking into a million pieces as it headed toward my face. It had seemed as though the storm centered on me alone. But now, although I couldn't see the snow anymore, I could feel it pelting against my whole body. It wasn't falling from one source anymore; it was being thrown from all directions, and Larry and I were both targets.

"We've got to be sure we stay on the highway!" I tried to shout above the shrieking of the wind. I stomped my feet on the cement. As long as we stayed on the highway, I knew we could get home. If we ever left the road, though, we could end up lost in the fields, wandering in circles until we froze to death. My stomach knotted as I remembered reading about a woman who had fallen and frozen one winter on a farm not far from us. She had died without even knowing that she was only a few yards from her own front door. *Nice going,*

Kipper, I told myself. *You've just walked your only cousin into a death trap.*

I staggered along behind Larry, suddenly feeling limp and helpless. For a moment I thought the wind would pick me up and hurl me away like an empty paper bag. Every time I make a mess of things, I feel that way—all hollow and useless. Even in the icy blast of cold wind, I felt my face get hot. I walked two steps and the wind pushed me back one.

We were going to die. With a sinking, sick feeling, I knew it. We were going to fall into a snowdrift and freeze to death. I imagined how my parents and my brothers would feel.

"But I thought they were staying at Scooter's house," Mom would cry. "I never dreamed that Kip would drag Larry out into the middle of a blizzard."

"Well, I get his bedroom now!" Ted would shout. Then Tim would argue and say that *he* was supposed to get it because the twins always argued about everything. Dad would just shake his head and sigh a lot, the way he'd done at Gramma Dole's funeral. Boomer wouldn't even miss me because he was only a baby.

Uncle Matt would suffer the most, I decided, because Larry was all he had since Aunt Mary had died long before. I thought of how the two of them "batched it," as Uncle Matt called it. Now he'd have to live all alone. And Larry and I would never get to do all the things we had planned to do when we grew up.

Maybe those thoughts kept me moving, because somehow I kept staggering through the wind and snow. Maybe Larry had the same kind of ideas. I don't know. We've never talked about it. And I guess that even if he had had them, Larry would never admit it. He'd call thoughts like that "dorky" and I guess they were.

I even started trying to imagine what thoughts Marcy might have after she heard that Larry and I were dead and gone.

I hoped she'd be sorrier about losing me than she would be about losing Larry. They'd been friends and neighbors for years, but Marcy and I had a special feeling for each other. I was thinking of her so clearly that I nearly jumped out of my skin when Larry grabbed my arm.

"I think I saw a light over that way!" he shouted. "I saw a light!"

I stopped, confused for a moment about where I was and what I was doing. Then the cold and the noise and the fury of the storm brought it all back again. "Couldn't be!" I shouted.

Larry's iced gloves jerked my face to the right. The force of the wind hit me harder as I peered into the blackness.

"I tell you, Kip, I saw a light over there!"

"But there can't be! Our house is the only one on this whole road! And we're a long way from that, and it's on the left anyway! There's only the old Morgansterne house on the right, and it's been empty for years. There's never even been electricity in there."

"I don't care. I saw a light. I'm going that way."

I grabbed Larry's arm. "We'll get into real trouble if we leave the highway—we've got to stay on it until we get home! We've got to stay together, Larry!" As I was talking, the wind was blowing my words away, but I knew that Larry heard me because I had a hold on his arm and I was shouting right into his face. "You only thought you saw a light there because you wanted to see one so much."

Larry shoved me back. "You can freeze out here if

you want to—I'm going to follow that light!" His voice faded into the wind as he moved away.

"Larry—we've got to stay together!" He might have shouted something back to me, but I couldn't hear him. I hesitated a second and then I lunged off to the right to follow him. *Faithful Boy Follows Cousin to Certain Death,* the headline in our weekly newspaper would say.

As my legs sank into even deeper snow, I clenched my fists. Without that highway as a guide, we'd be lost in the fields for sure, hidden under the drifts of snow left by the blizzard. "Larry," I shouted, peering into the wet blackness, "we've got to turn back!"

But Larry was too stubborn ever to admit he was wrong. The wind was so powerful, we were scarcely able to move. The snow drifted over our knees, and sheets of it were flung against our bodies as it whirled and raged around us in the blackness. The wind was as loud as a train whistle in a tunnel, and my toes and fingers were numb. My face hurt and my skin felt stiff.

There wasn't any light. I was sure of that, but I kept right on following Larry because I wasn't going to quit until he did. I fought against wanting to fall down and go to sleep. My forehead and my eyes ached, and I kept trying to hold my mouth down inside the collar of my jacket, but the moisture of my breath was making icicles on the wool. The hair sticking out from my hood and cap was frozen solid. "We've got to turn back!" I shouted.

But then, just as the words were blown back into my face, I squinted my eyes and opened them up again. Gradually, far ahead in the distance, I could make out a faint, flickering light. I was sure I was only imagining it, like a person dying of thirst might imagine seeing

water on the desert. But the light seemed to dance in front of me, a tiny beacon flashing through the swirling snow in the distance.

"It's a light!" I yelled, grabbing Larry.

"I told you!" Larry shouted. "I told you!" He started trying to run, then. I unclenched my frozen fists and plowed through the snow after him. His words were caught in the wind and tossed back to me. "We're going to make it, Kipper. We're going to make it!"

CHAPTER TWO

We moved like zombies through the snow drifts. The thought of safety gave me strength I didn't know I had, but my body felt stiff and rigid. The light kept getting bigger and brighter. My half-frozen brain recognized that we had to be heading for Miss Morgansterne's old house, but it seemed impossible. How could there be a light in an abandoned house?

We staggered up the porch steps and hammered on the front door. Instantly it fell open and we were both thrown forward by a great gust of wind.

All I can remember from that first moment is the heat against my face. It felt as though someone had thrown a bucket of hot water at me. The ice on my face and hair began to melt. A wood-burning stove was just a few feet from the door, and it was going full blast, glowing in the shadowy blackness of the vacant room. Larry slammed the door behind us, and I staggered toward the stove. We weren't going to die after all. The thought was a warm wave washing over my body. I dropped my frozen gloves. As they clunked to the floor Larry came up behind me, and we put our hands out to the heat.

The force of that warmth was a magnet pulling me back to life again. Water ran down my face. I threw my hat on the floor.

"You look like a drowned rat," Larry said, pulling his hood off. He stared at me, his red hair plastered wet and dark against his face. Water was dripping from his jacket and there were puddles on the floor where the snow was melting from our boots.

"So do you." For a few seconds we both just stood there grinning at each other as the heat melted away the fears from our minds along with the snow from our clothes. Then we unzipped our jackets and hovered as close to that stove as we dared.

Slowly all my senses started working again. First I had felt the heat of the room, then I had begun to see and hear. Now I could smell things, too. There was the suffocating odor of warm, wet wool where our jackets touched the stove. There was the sharp aroma of the smoke from burning oil, too. Two oil lanterns were sputtering on the table near the front window. Those were the lights Larry must have seen. I stared at them, suddenly scared. At first I had been so glad to get shelter that I hadn't thought about how the heat got there. Now I realized how strange it was that people had obviously been inside the house, and I wondered where they were now.

Larry was gazing all around the room too, and the same idea must have struck him. He took a deep breath. "Anybody here?" he shouted. I strained forward to hear any answer, but there wasn't a sound in the house, and only the storm continued to howl outside.

My eyes were used to the smoky haze now, so I tried to see beyond the shadows flickering around the fire. I'd seen the room before but only by peeking through the window. My brothers and I had often prowled around

Miss Morgansterne's old house. It was the only building along our road, and no one had lived in it for at least six years. The windows had grown grimier and dustier and cobwebbier as time passed, but it had still been fun to look inside. Some furniture was still there, too, a few tables and cabinets, old-fashioned, gigantic, and claw footed. Gloomy old pictures hung on all the walls. Empty oil lamps were sitting on all the tables, their blackened chimneys crooked and, we could tell even from the outside, chipped and cracked. Looking through the windows had been like looking through a hole into the past.

Now I was finally inside the house. It gave me a strange, creepy feeling to be standing there myself, as though I'd suddenly stepped into a time warp. I guess I half expected Miss Morgansterne to come walking out of the shadows looking exactly like the young girl in the picture by the front door. She was old now, I knew that, but my real world seemed blurry and shifting, and anything at all seemed possible in the strange old house.

"What's going on in here?" Larry whispered. "Who's been in this place?" I wasn't sure whether it was the eerie sound of his voice or my wet, heavy collar against my skin, but I felt chills rising up on the back of my neck.

I tried to peer into the next room. It had been a dining room, I could see, because there was still a huge dining table there. It had fat legs, carved like an animal's. I could see the claws in the shadows on the floor. There wasn't any carpet—only rag rugs here and there. Another oil lamp was sputtering on a small table against the far wall, but the light was nearly out.

Larry stepped over and took one of the lanterns from the front window. He lifted it high above his head.

Black shadows went leaping in all directions. The house was absolutely silent. "Anybody here?" he shouted again.

I looked toward the dark stairs leading to the second floor. Larry looked in that direction too. "You think somebody is up there?" he whispered hoarsely.

Larry lowered the lantern. Now his face reflected the darting shadows of the burning oil. His shadow loomed huge and black behind him as he looked back toward the dining room.

"Tim and Ted say this place is haunted," I said suddenly. I was trying to make the words sound like a joke, but my voice cracked.

"The lock on that front door was broken," Larry told me. "Ghosts don't need to do that. And look over there." Holding the lantern in front of him, Larry walked toward the dining room, and I inched along behind him. Two boxes of instant soup were lying on the table, their red and white cardboard gleaming in the wavering light. It seemed weird to see something so modern in a room so old, like finding a calculator in an abacus shop.

Larry looked around the room and settled his gaze on the door leading to the kitchen. "The stove and these lamps have been burning only a few hours. Who could have started them, Kip?"

My brain felt as soggy as my wet clothes. "I don't know. Do you think somebody's still here?" My voice cracked again. "Do you think somebody's hiding?"

Larry started toward the dark doorway. "We'd better check in every room, just to be sure. Anybody here?" he shouted again, stomping toward the kitchen.

The heat from that front room stove didn't reach the kitchen. As we stepped across the threshold, the cold air hit our faces. It was a dark, decaying room, and it smelled musty and sour. Ugly, gouged, and ripped lino-

leum lay on the floor, but there wasn't any furniture. No stove or sink or table. The wallpaper was hanging in long, ripped shreds, exposing patches of white plaster on the walls. Some small logs were piled up beside the door leading outside, with an old pile of newspapers and magazines nearby. Somebody had brought in fuel for a winter long ago, because the papers were aged and yellow.

"Nobody here." Larry moved the light of the lantern from one wall to another. A small, narrow door leaped into view. "What's that?" he whispered.

"Probably a root cellar," I whispered back. "Lots of old farm houses had holes dug out under the kitchen so people could store vegetables all winter."

Larry hesitated, and again I felt chills race up and down my spine. He held the lantern higher. "We'd better go down and take a look."

We moved across the worn linoleum and slowly opened the door. A cold blast of freezing air came blowing out. The flame inside Larry's lamp flickered and wavered, and his face was pale as he stared at me. "Anybody here?" he shouted.

There was silence below as we creaked down the stairs. The air felt even colder, and I hoped Larry would think I was shivering from it and not from fear. We were only halfway down the steps when we saw that the tiny cellar was empty.

"Spooky, isn't it," Larry said, moving the lantern from side to side. Shadows flashed on the crumbling stone walls and darted across the dirt floor.

I suddenly realized that I hadn't been breathing. I took a deep breath. "Nobody's here."

"Unless someone is buried under all that dirt," Larry said, waving the lamp toward the floor.

"That isn't funny," I told him. We went stomping up

again, making more noise than we needed to, leaving wet boot marks wherever we stepped.

"I don't get it," Larry said, when we were back in the living room. "Who do you suppose was here? Why would anybody break into an old house, light a few fires, and then leave?"

I looked around the empty room. It was exactly the way we had left it. "Think we'd better look upstairs too? Just to be sure nobody's there?"

Larry sighed. I could see that he didn't like this crazy setup any better than I did. Slowly we climbed the stairs, our shadows looming like black aliens against the plaster walls. My heart was hammering as loud as the wind beating against the old house.

There was a long hallway in front of us, with four closed doors. Slowly, cautiously, we walked up to each door, then flung it open the way they do in police shows. But every room was vacant: no people, no furniture, nothing. There was a small box in the fourth room, though.

"We'd better take a look," I said. Larry held the lantern over my head as I bent to look inside. I caught my breath when the shine of gold glimmered from the cardboard. I was sure we'd found a real treasure.

"Christmas ornaments!" Larry snorted in disgust.

I was glad he didn't know what I had thought. "Miss Morgansterne must have left her tree decorations here," I said, standing up again.

Larry and I looked at each other. I wondered if my face looked as pale and scared as his did. "So we're all alone in this house for sure," he said.

"I guess so." Even as I said the words, though, I still had a creepy feeling that we weren't alone.

Larry glanced toward the window where the frame was rattling in the wind. "Remember that silver car?

Do you think the people in there had anything to do with this?"

I shrugged. "Miss Morgansterne lives in Texas now. None of her relatives live around here. If somebody broke in, they—"

"They didn't have any business in here," Larry finished for me. He cleared his throat. "Think they'll be back, Kip?"

I nodded at the window. The storm was raging even more fiercely than before. "If it keeps on like this, they won't be going anywhere. The roads will be closed."

We started for the stairway again. As we went downstairs, the wind was beating against the house like a balled-up fist.

Larry stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "If people in a car can't go anywhere, what about us? Will we be able to get over to your house tonight?"

I shook my head. "I don't think we could make it now, Larry. We'll have to spend the night here." I followed Larry over to the stove again, and I wondered why I felt colder inside the old house now than I had felt outside before in the howling winds of the blizzard.

CHAPTER THREE

Larry talked about plans for drying out all our stuff, but I hardly listened to him. Suddenly I was thinking about Mom and my three brothers. I wondered if they were all right, and I wondered if Dad was in the middle of a blizzard in Kansas City, too.

As Larry was talking, I crossed over to the window and looked up the road toward home. All I could see was the snow swirling out of the blackness, banging against the glass. I felt hollow and sad, but I knew that Larry would never be able to understand that. In a way he was lucky. He had only himself to think about in his family. Who'd ever have to worry about a dad who was chief of police? I had three brothers and my parents, and having a big family is both good and bad. Larry liked his life the way it was, nice and quiet with nobody to worry about. I had to put up with mine whether I liked it or not. Sighing, I stared out into the dark. The wind was hurling itself against the window, and the porch was groaning and shaking.

"I guess you can't call home from here." I hadn't heard him move, but Larry was standing right beside me.

"Are you a mind reader or something? I was just thinking about—"

"I know what you were thinking about. Your face always gives away your thoughts, Kip. I wish we could call somebody, too. Did they ever have a telephone in this house?"

I shook my head. "Dad told me that old Mr. Morgansterne didn't like modern inventions. He didn't have electricity, running water, *or* a telephone. When he died, Miss Morgansterne was the only one left. She moved to a retirement home in Texas a month later. I guess that was six or seven years ago."

"A retirement home? The daughter was old enough to retire? How old was Mr. Morgansterne when he died?"

"Really old, I guess. More than ninety."

Larry whistled. "Wow! Maybe being without modern inventions makes you live longer."

I shook my head and said the first thing that came to me. "Nah. It only *seems* longer."

"Maybe you're right," Larry said, laughing. "Maybe you're right." He paused a minute, and then he went on. "We always seem to have something to laugh about no matter what happens. I'm glad I came for the holidays."

I hadn't meant to be funny, but Larry's laugh made me feel better somehow. I shrugged and decided to tell him the truth. "The reason I wanted to go into town today is because I thought you were bored on the farm. When we talked on the phone last month, I thought you sounded like you wanted to go to that convention with your dad."

Larry looked out the window. "That would have been okay, too. But I told Dad that if I had a choice, I wanted to visit you. I wanted to see that family you always talked about when you visited me."

"But nothing ever happens around here," I told him. "Every time I visit you in Michigan, exciting things seem to happen."

"Are you kidding? This blizzard is plenty exciting! Besides, do you think it's always terrific at my house? Nah! Just being with your brothers is kind of neat, if you ask me." He turned to look at me now, and I saw that his hair had dried and was sticking up all over his head.

"You like Tim and Ted?"

"Sure. I get a kick out of them. They're only eight, so they're just kids, but they're still fun. I always wondered why you called them Pete and Repeat. Now I know."

"Whatever one says, the other echoes," I told him. "And they always want the same things, so they end up arguing all the time."

"And that Boomer! He's the best baby I ever saw. Good looking, too."

I hooted. "That's because Mom says that Boomer looks just like you."

"Well? Ain't I good looking?" Larry crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. "How'd you come up with a name like Boomer?"

"Barnaby seems too grown-up for a baby. Besides, he's been booming since we got him."

"And you're Kipper because your dad is a Christopher, too. You know what?" Larry looked out the window again. "All four of you guys got nicknames. People only use nicknames for people they care about."

I was grinning, thinking of my parents and my brothers and all the crazy jokes and games we have in my family, and then I remembered Larry's house, always so neat and quiet. And empty. Suddenly it didn't seem all that wonderful. I could see why Larry might

really like being in the middle of a noisy mob like my family.

"Anybody ever call you Lawrence?"

He whirled around, and I could see that he had never thought of that idea before. He reached over and punched my arm. "How come you're just standing there talking? We've got work to do! You've got beds to make." He laughed, but then his smile faded. "But I'm sorry you can't call home."

"Oh, the line is probably down anyway. When we have a bad storm, that happens. Even if they had a telephone here, it would probably be dead."

"And we might be dead, too, if we don't get something to eat." Larry rubbed his stomach. "It's time for dinner, Cousin." He stood up straighter and threw one hand over his chest. "And I, Lawrenz Z. Cheeeef, will prepare zee feast!"

"You're crazy," I told him. I glanced around at the flickering shadows. "What'll you use for food?"

Larry reached forward and pinched the air. "Zum of zees, zum of zat." Then he curled the ends of an imaginary mustache. "I, Cheeeeeef Lawrenz Z., weel amazzzzzz you!"

And he really did. He had a candy bar from the bowling alley in his jacket pocket. We shared that, and we ate the powdered soup mix right from the boxes. We laughed and made jokes, and soon we were howling almost as loud as the wind.

"Snow kidding, this is some storm," Larry kept saying, and every time he said it, it cracked me up. I even stopped listening for the sound of sudden footsteps.

Finally, around ten o'clock, we decided to go to sleep. We added some more wood to the fire, and we dragged the rag rugs closer to the stove. Our coats were nearly dry, so we wadded them up to make pillows. We blew

out the lanterns and lay flat on the floor. Only the glow from the stove lighted up the dark room then.

It was eerie lying there watching shadows leap all over the walls and the ceiling. There was a draft across the floor, too, and the side of me nearer to the stove was too hot while the other side was too cold. Now that Larry and I were quiet, I could hear the old house rattle and creak and almost moan in the wind, and all my fears came thundering back. I wondered if the person who had lighted the fires might suddenly jump out of a hidden closet. Maybe there was a secret room behind a false wall. Maybe somebody in the house was just waiting for us to fall asleep. I opened my eyes wider.

Larry was still awake, too. "Kipper?" He wriggled closer. "Do you think there's anybody in this house besides the two of us?"

There wasn't anybody around to hear us, but I found myself whispering in answer. "We checked all over, didn't we? Nobody was here. And nobody can get here now through this blizzard."

"I keep wondering what happened here, wondering why anybody would light those fires and then leave."

"Lucky thing for us somebody did," I said. For a few moments there was only the crackling of the fire, then Larry cleared his throat.

"I was just thinking about something I read in the newspaper. There were these two kids who were trespassing in an old house. Like we're doing. They didn't know it, but there was an insane killer hiding inside. He was a psycho, escaped from prison." Larry dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. I had to lean closer to hear him.

"They never came home that night. Their parents finally got so worried, they called the neighbors and everybody started looking for them. Finally someone

thought of looking in the rambling old mansion on the top of the deserted hill.

"They went inside. When they got to the living room, they saw this huge figure. A man was sitting with his back to them. He was sitting in a rocking chair, moving back and forth, back and forth. They thought he was sewing, because they saw his hand pull up and then go down. Pull up and then go down. But he wasn't sewing. Oh no, not sewing at all."

His voice gave me goose bumps it was so creepy sounding. "What was he doing then?"

"Pulling the hair out of the two heads," Larry whispered. "This man had cut the heads off the two boys and he had both of them lying on his lap, and he was pulling their hairs out, one by one."

I bolted upright. "What? What kind of story was that?"

"Oh, one I just read. I was just thinking about it."

"Was it true?"

"Nah. It was just a story in the Sunday section of our newspaper." Larry's voice sounded sleepy.

"Well, it was a stupid story. I don't know why you had to go and tell it now."

"Oh, I just happened to think of it." Larry yawned. "See you in the morning, Kip."

Larry was asleep in seconds. I could tell by his breathing.

And I was fuming. He'd told a story gory enough to curdle the blood of a vampire, and then he'd fallen asleep. First he'd been able to make me feel good in this creepy old house, and then he'd made me feel terrible. I wanted to go over, wake him up, and sock him.

I lay there wide awake for hours, it seemed. I heard every creak and every rattle. I felt damp and hot on one side and wet and cold on the other. The floor was

harder than a rock and my head ached. I was hungry too.

Most of all, though, I guess I was scared. I wondered if the creaking old house we were in was really as empty as we thought it was. I wondered if someone had somehow managed to blunder through the blizzard and was waiting to sneak inside. I kept thinking of an insane killer and two boys in a deserted house. Shivers raced up and down my neck.

"You're a rat, Larry Levitt," I whispered in the darkness, but of course he couldn't hear me. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of a rocking chair going back and forth, back and forth. A man was sitting in it, and his arm was going up and down, up and down. But nobody was sewing. Oh no, nobody was sewing at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

As soon as there was a beam of daylight, I woke Larry. I was still sleepy, tired, and achy, but the blizzard was over and I wanted to get home as fast as I could.

Larry stood up, stretched, and yawned. He opened the stove door. "Almost burned down. I guess it's okay to leave this the way it is."

I already had my hat and coat on, with one hand on the front doorknob. "We won't be able to lock the door again. This lock is smashed."

"Guess the police will have to come. Maybe they can figure out why somebody broke in here." Larry unwadded his coat and found his hat. We pulled on our boots and went outside.

We stepped out on the front porch in the midst of a bright, quiet dawn. There wasn't any wind, but we could see the results of the blizzard. On the distant fields, great drifts of snow had swirled up into high pointed peaks, while right beside them the ground was nearly bare. The snow seemed to be rising and falling like waves in a stormy lake.

"Wow!" Larry heaved a big breath and it hung visible in the cold air. "You can't even see where the road is."

He was right. Flat, unmarred, white emptiness stretched out in all directions. The trees and their branches were covered with snow; there wasn't a bird in sight. I shaded my eyes and tried to see my house in the distance—or at least see a sign of smoke from the chimney, but there was only more whiteness. "We could have never made it home last night," I whispered.

We clomped down the rickety porch stairs. The snow squeaked when we walked on it, and all our footprints from the night before were buried. Tiny crystals of snow sparkled on the surface like diamonds. The sunlight was getting brighter and stronger. I filled my lungs with the cold air, and it felt good. It was hard to remember how terrible the wind had been just the night before. But far off, where I knew there were fences, the snowdrifts were three or four feet high.

"We were sure lucky we found that house," Larry said.

I nodded. "We'd have been frozen for sure."

"My dad says that only the good die young."

"Then we must be awful!"

Larry jabbed my arm. But I hardly felt it beneath my heavy jacket. "Yeah, we're bad all right, really bad!" He squinted and looked off into the distance. "Well, Cousin, let's go."

We struggled along through the snow to the road. Larry was well ahead of me, but he turned around to talk, and I could see that his thoughts were the same as mine. "Hey, won't Tim and Ted be mad when they hear we spent the night in that house! They're going to—"

Larry hit against a huge drift then and nearly tumbled over backward. "My gosh!" he yelled. "These drifts will nearly finish the snowplows when they get here."

"I hope not. Our road is usually the last one plowed."

My breath hung in the air, and when I reached Larry, we both turned and looked back toward Miss Morgansterne's house. Only our footprints marred the smooth white snow. The road to home was just a long white emptiness, too, but already the sun was warmer, and I knew there would be spots on the pavement where the snow was melting.

"Your mom will sure be surprised to see us," Larry said as we plodded along. "She'll be thinking that we're still sound asleep at Scooter's house."

"I hope she's been thinking that. Last night I got to worrying that she might have called down there after the blizzard hit. Or what if Scooter's mom called her? Then they would *all* be wondering where we are."

Only the sound of Larry's footsteps answered me, then finally he spoke. "I hadn't thought of that. I guess I don't much know what mothers do."

"That's what they do," I said. "They worry."

"But you said the telephone lines might be down."

"Yeah. And this time I'm hoping that they are."

Half an hour later we were starting up the driveway to my house. Just ahead, by the big evergreen tree in our yard, I saw my mother. Her hair is as red as Larry's, and it was shining in the bright sunlight. She had her back turned toward us, reaching up high to a branch on the biggest part of the tree. "She's feeding the birds," I told Larry. "They must be all finished with breakfast inside."

"Mom!" I yelled, starting to run. "Hey, Mom!"

When she turned, I saw that she had thrown Dad's red hunting jacket over her blue robe, and his black galoshes over her slippers, so she looked kind of funny. She did that every morning, though, whenever it was wet or cold outside, so I wasn't noticing that so much. What I really saw were all the expressions on her face.

First she looked puzzled, then happy, then surprised, and all of these emotions came so fast that she stayed frozen to the spot.

"Kipper! Larry!" she finally blurted. Then she dropped her pan of toast crusts as I grabbed her. She always worries that she's too fat, but she felt just fine to me right then.

"What's going on? Weren't you in town all night? Who brought you home already? How'd you get up the road without a plow?" She backed away, and the three of us looked toward town. As far as we could see there was just a flat surface of snow with only two sets of footprints blotting the surface.

"Then you weren't worrying? You didn't wonder why we didn't call last night?"

"Of course I was worrying. But I knew you couldn't call me because our telephone went when the first winds hit. I tried to reach Scooter's and couldn't, so I knew you couldn't reach me either." She stopped and her mouth dropped open as she looked back up the road again. "You didn't stay at Scooter's house?"

"Nope!" Larry grinned. "Kipper got mad at him, so we both left."

"Then where? How? You couldn't have been out in that blizzard all night!"

"We were with ghosts," Larry told her.

"We were at Miss Morgansterne's house," I said.

Mom glanced from me to Larry. "Ghosts! Miss Morgansterne's! But she's not there anymore. What happened? Did you—"

"Kipper! Larry!"

Ted and Tim were hanging out the back door shouting. They were both wearing their pajamas, and for a minute I thought Ted was going to run right out in his bare feet. He's the twin with the glasses, and he's al-

ways breaking them because he jumps first and thinks later.

"Where you been?" one yelled.

"Where you been?" echoed the other.

"Christopher Dole!" Mom said, grabbing me. "Now you tell me what really happened. Are you both all right? Are you sure you're all right? And what about Scooter? How'd you get home? I can't—"

She asked questions all the way to the house. We went inside through the back shed door. Tim and Ted threw open the kitchen door and started firing out questions too. They had left the kitchen door open, so I could see inside.

For a second I just stood in the doorway looking at everything. A new cereal box was lying on the table, so I knew the twins had been arguing over who got the prize. They like the same things, and except for Ted's glasses, they look the same, too, both blue-eyed and blond. They're both tall and skinny.

But Boomer, the baby, is fat. He has red hair like Larry's and dark eyes like mine. He was sitting in his high chair, banging a spoon on his tray. He grinned and yelled louder when he saw us.

"You guys shut that kitchen door!" Mom called to Ted. "You're letting all the heat out."

When all three of us finally had our coats and boots off, we opened the kitchen door again.

"Where were you?" Ted asked. "Where's Scooter?"

"How'd you get through all the snow?" Tim shouted.

"Milk! Milk! Milk!" Boomer yelled, beating his spoon. The kitchen was hot, noisy, and messy, but I was sure glad to be there.

Mom collapsed into a chair. "I can hardly believe you're here," she said. "I was so sure you'd be in town

and I wouldn't see you until after the road was plowed. What happened?"

Larry jumped right in with the answers, and I let him talk while I fixed some peanut butter and toast for us. He could have called his story, "The Daring Duo Face the Ghosts of the Arctic." He had a few things wrong. I hadn't been *scared* sleeping in that house after we knew it was empty. I'd only been a little jumpy. And it had only been because of his gory story.

"But who could have been there earlier?" Mom asked when the twins quieted down. "Why would anybody break into Miss Morgansterne's old house?"

"Ghosts!" Tim answered.

"Ghosts!" Ted agreed.

"Ghosts don't break locks," Mom said. "And I don't think they need fires to keep them warm either." She tapped her fingers on the table. "I think I'd better call Sheriff Willoby about this. Somebody broke into Miss Morgansterne's house, and he'll want to investigate. He'll have to talk to you two." She shook her head. "But thank God somebody left those lamps for you. Thank God for that!"

"I still think it's ghosts," Tim said.

"How do we know what ghosts like to do?" Ted asked. "They might like fires, too."

They both kept talking, and Boomer kept yelling, but Mom ignored them all. "As soon as that telephone is working again, I'm going to call Ed Willoby. In the meantime—" She stood up and pointed at the table. "Kip and Larry—you clean up the kitchen when you're finished out here. Ted and Tim, you guys make your beds and get dressed." She reached over and lifted Boomer out of his chair. "And you need a change," she said.

In two seconds Larry and I were left alone in the kitchen. After all the racket and confusion, the sudden silence thudded between us.

Larry took a deep breath. He looked at me and wiggled his eyebrows. "And you thought I'd be bored here?"

"I was wrong," I told him, laughing. "I was wrong."

CHAPTER FIVE

Within half an hour, we had the room spotless. When it comes to kitchen work, Larry says he's faster than a passel of maids, more powerful than an automatic dishwasher, and able to prolong the life of suds throughout a single session. "Superman of the Soaps," he calls himself, and I guess he is.

When Mom came back into the kitchen, she smiled. She stood holding Boomer and staring at the gleaming sink. Then she looked at Larry. "The girl who gets you will be lucky!" she said. "Kip and the twins do okay, but I never saw them work so fast."

"Oh, Kip's a fast worker too," Larry said, nudging me. "And a girl has already got him. Just ask Marcy."

I glared at him. Lucky for him Mom was taking Boomer to his playpen in the living room, and the twins were still upstairs. If they had started teasing me, too, I think I would have slugged Larry. Marcy and I are just friends, I keep telling him, just friends.

"The snowplow is coming!" Tim yelled from upstairs. He came thundering down the steps. "I saw it from the window."

I looked out in time to see Morris Parsons go by on

the county snowplow. It was after nine o'clock, and the sun was really bright. There wasn't a single flake of snow swirling now. There wasn't any wind at all. It seemed hard to believe that just the night before those winds had been howling and raging and piling up huge drifts of snow. A tiger had turned into a kitten.

"So we're back with civilization now," Mom said. "I think—"

The ringing of the telephone cut off the rest. "Good—that's back to normal, too," she said, picking up the receiver.

It was Dad, calling from Kansas City, Mom told us after she hung up. "He says he wanted to be sure we were okay. That storm hit everywhere."

"Did you tell him that Kipper and Larry spent the night with ghosts?" Tim asked.

Mom shook her head. "There aren't any ghosts, honey. And no, I didn't tell Dad about Miss Morgansterne's house. No sense in worrying him. He'll find out all about it once he gets home. I'll make that call to Ed Willoby now. He'll know what to do about that break-in."

"This Sheriff Willoby," Larry asked as we went upstairs, "is he pretty good?"

I thought of Ed Willoby in his overalls and his homemade scarves. HIs wife, Alma, was our school secretary, so every year she arranged to have him come to our school to talk about crime. The talks were always pretty boring. He sure didn't look or act like Larry's dad. "That depends on what you mean by good," I answered. "He's—"

"Kipper! Larry!" Ted came bursting out of his bedroom. "There was a robbery! It's on the radio! Crandall's Jewelry Store!"

Larry and I nearly tripped over each other running to the radio. The announcer was still talking:

> ...few leads in the case. Elmer Crandall, owner, reported that most of the missing jewels are diamonds. Police Chief Hank Ewing has confirmed that a witness saw the robbery take place. A thorough investigation is under way. In other local news...

"Crandall's Jewelry Store!" I looked at Larry. "I can't believe it! I don't think we've ever had a robbery in Grandville before."

"We never did," Ted said, poking at his glasses. "We never did."

"Well, you have now." Larry stepped closer. "Hey, maybe we can help find those diamonds, Kipper. Wouldn't that be something? Let's tell the sheriff we'll help him."

"Are you crazy?" I plopped down on Tim's bed. "We aren't related to anybody special around here, Larry. You only get to do police work in Ludington because of your dad. We won't be able to do anything about that robbery. The sheriff won't either. He only takes care of stuff out in the country. The police downtown take care of Grandville."

Ted grabbed his arm. "I'll help you find the diamonds, Larry."

Just then I heard Mom calling from downstairs. "Ed Willoby said he'll be here in half an hour," she shouted.

Ted whirled to the open door. "I'm going down and tell Mom and Tim about that robbery!"

By the time Larry and I got downstairs, the twins were hopping around like popcorn in a popper. Mom

was sitting in Dad's easy chair beside Boomer's playpen. "What a night!" she said, shaking her head. "A blizzard, a house break-in, and now a robbery!"

Larry grinned. "It's because of me."

"You must be like your mother," she told him. "When we were kids, excitement followed her around like a shadow."

It was hard for me to imagine my mother as a kid. And I suppose it was hard for Larry to imagine his mother at all.

"Here he comes!" Tim shouted. "Here comes the sheriff!"

"Is he using the siren?" Ted asked, running to the window. "Is he using the red light?"

But he wasn't using either of them. When I looked out the window, I saw a small speck of a car winding its way up the plowed road. When Sheriff Willoby finally reached our house, he took a long time parking because there were such huge piles left by the snowplow.

After he climbed from his car, he tried to walk up the driveway in the footsteps Larry and I had made, but he moved as slowly as the biggest ball of snow does when you're trying to make a snowman. He looked as round as a ball, too, all bundled up and muffled. His long green scarf was almost dragging in the snow. I knew his wife had probably knitted it for him and probably made him wear it, too. Alma Willoby is always either knitting or typing or telling people what to do. She does the last thing the best of all.

"Maybe he'll tell us all about that robbery," Ted said. "Larry and I are going to help him find the diamonds."

Tim frowned. "Well, I get to help, too!"

"He's not here about that robbery," I reminded them. "He's here to talk about Miss Morgansterne's house."

Larry was frowning out the window. "He sure moves slow."

"That's because he's so fat," Ted whispered.

"Lots of kids call him the Crisco Kid," Tim added.

"Well, *we* call him Sheriff Willoby," Mom said loudly. She glared at the twins. "After all—"

"I'll go open the door for the sheriff," I interrupted. Mom was about to go into her only-inferior-people-call-other-people-nasty-names lecture, and I'd heard it a hundred times. Also I guess I was hoping I could get to the door first so I'd be the first one to know if he had any news about the robbery.

But it was a hopeless idea. Even as I hurried from the room, I heard the rumble of footsteps behind me.

"I'll get it," Tim shouted.

"I will!" Ted yelled.

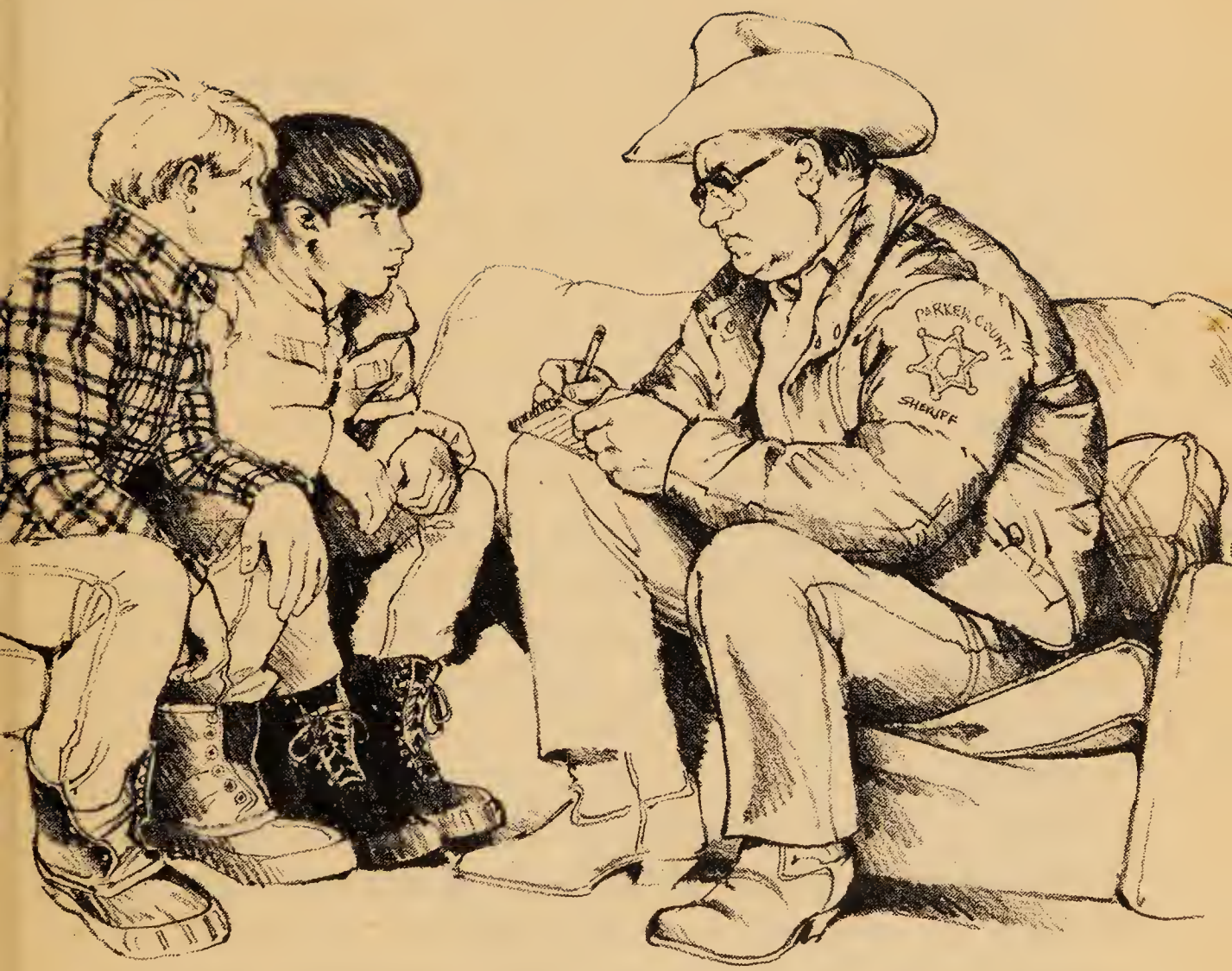
But it was Larry, of course, who got there first.

CHAPTER SIX

Some people fill a room with their bodies or their ideas. Sheriff Willoby filled our kitchen with his voice. It rumbled up from deep inside his chest, bounced against the walls, and practically rattled the dishes in the cupboard. When we walked into the living room, Boomer stood up in his playpen looking puzzled. It was the first time he'd ever heard anybody talk louder than he did, I guess.

"So how'd you boys end up in that house?" the sheriff asked, sitting down in Dad's easy chair. He still had his scarf on, but he'd given Mom his coat. His hair stuck up all around his head like a gray halo. He wore round, wire-rimmed glasses with a straight line right across each lens. He peered at me over the top of them when he talked. "It was snowing like blue blazes last night. Lucky thing it's starting to melt now. Melting almost as fast as it fell."

Larry was answering the question, so I let him talk. Sheriff Willoby took out a small notebook, but he didn't write anything down at first. Mostly he just nodded and smoothed down his hair, which popped up again. "Mighty strange," he kept mumbling. He hardly seemed


PARKER COUNTY
SHERIFF

to notice when Mom made Tim and Ted leave the room because they kept trying to interrupt Larry. He told the sheriff all about the lamps near the window and the lighted fire and the empty basement and the empty bedrooms.

"And the lock on the front door was broken," I put in.

"But you never saw anybody?" the sheriff asked. "You didn't see any cars along that road when you were walking?"

"We kept wishing we would see a car," Larry told him. "But there wasn't anything along that road at all."

"Except for the silver car," I added.

"Oh yeah." Larry nodded. "Just when we came from town, we saw a big silver car drive away from this road. But that was before the storm had really hit."

The sheriff sighed and finally wrote something down in his notebook.

Mom leaned forward. "Do you think the realtors might have lighted those fires? I know they've been trying to sell that house for years. Did they have to force the lock for some reason?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I called them right after you called me. No one from their office has been there in months. No one has shown the least interest in that old house."

"Somebody was interested late yesterday," Larry said.

"And it sounds to me as though you were mighty lucky that they were." Sheriff Willoby looked at his notebook again. I guess we all thought he was going to say something more because we all sat waiting, but he just kept staring at his book. I could hear the twins whispering in the hallway. Finally Larry leaned forward and asked the question I knew he'd ask. It

had been bouncing around in my brain, too, but I'd been too embarrassed to ask because I didn't want to sound dumb. Larry never worries about whether his questions are dumb or not. When he wants to know something, he just blurts out the question.

"Could there be any connection between the break-in at that old house and the jewelry store robbery last night?"

The whispering in the hallway stopped. Sheriff Willoby blinked and peered over his glasses. "So you know about that, too, do you?" He laughed and put his notebook back into his pocket. "Guess the whole town is buzzing about that robbery. Crandall had quite an inventory—mostly diamonds. But the thieves took everything, even the costume junk. They must have been in a big hurry, and they didn't want to miss out on anything valuable, so they carried off the whole kit and caboodle. I doubt that there's any tie-in with Morgansterne's house, though. Why would there be?"

"Maybe the diamonds are hidden in that house!" Tim said. He and Ted had appeared in the living room again.

"Maybe the robbers are in there too!" Ted added. "Maybe that's the hideout."

"Oh yeah?" I glared at my brothers. "Then where were they last night when Larry and I spent the whole night over there?"

"In a secret tunnel," Ted told me.

"Behind a painting," Tim said, "with the eyes cut out so they could watch you."

Sheriff Willoby laughed. "You two are as bad as my grandsons. Overactive imaginations, that's what I call it."

"Too much television, that's what I call it," Mom said. "Okay, you two—out of here! I told you to go upstairs." Just then Boomer started yelling. Mom shook her head.

"It's a madhouse here, as usual. Could I get you a cup of coffee, Ed?"

"No. No thanks. I think I'd like to borrow these young men for a few moments, though. I'd like to take them back to that house and have them show me exactly the way things looked when they stumbled in there. Miss Morgansterne hasn't been around for years, but she's still a taxpayer, and she'll need to know what's going on. The fellows downtown will be taking care of that jewelry store case. I need to follow up on the break-in. Think Kip and Larry can go over with me now?"

"Sure!" Larry said.

"Can we go, too?" Tim asked.

"Can we?" Ted echoed.

"Absolutely not!" Mom turned and looked at Sheriff Willoby. "But Kip and Larry can certainly go along with you. I hope you don't think, though, that they would have gone into that house without a good reason."

"I know they had to do what they did." Sheriff Willoby raised himself up out of the chair. "Seems strange to think that someone who was up to no good in that house accidentally saved these two boys. That was some storm last night—it swooped in fast and furious and left in just as big a hurry. If those intruders left to get some dinner, they must have been out when the full force of the blizzard hit. Maybe they had to hole up some place else. Driving was pretty hazardous."

"So was walking," Larry said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It sure was."

We finally had our hats, boots, and gloves on again, and the three of us left the shed. I could hear Tim and Ted running so that they could watch us from the front window.

When we stepped outside, the sudden glare hurt my

eyes. The sun was dazzling bright, and the snow was sparkling. The ice was already melting off the trees, and the air was moist and almost warm.

Larry spread out his arms. "Look!" he shouted. "I've found the missing diamonds! They're heaped all around us!"

I laughed and kept walking, but I knew what he meant. The top of the snow was flashing silver in the sunlight, and crystals of water were hardened like small diamonds glittering in the snow.

Sheriff Willoby snorted. "But these diamonds melt." He kicked at a small pile of snow. "Course, it doesn't melt fast enough to suit me."

We were moving down the driveway to the car. "Hope I can turn around without getting stuck," the sheriff mumbled. "No matter how beautiful snow looks, it's still just a pain to me. Hop right in, fellows. It's not locked."

Larry jumped into the front seat. I knew that he liked to be by the police radio. But I smiled because I knew he wouldn't be hearing anything important on this one. I climbed into the back.

Sheriff Willoby huffed and puffed a bit, but he finally got the car turned around and we headed back to Miss Morgansterne's house. There were patches in the center of the road where the snow had completely melted already, but the snowplow drifts were high on both sides.

Just as we were getting close to the front of the house, the car radio started blaring. It sounded like nothing but crackling and rumbling static to me, but Larry shouted, "Hey! Did you hear that, Kipper?"

Sheriff Willoby stopped the car. He looked back up the road behind, as though thinking he might turn around and take us home again.

I bolted forward. "What's going on?"

"Hank's calling his men into the police station. There's some big news about that robbery last night." The sheriff frowned a moment, and then turned back to his steering wheel. The car shot forward. "I'm going to make a quick trip into town so that I can get in on this. You kids sit tight. When I get to the station, I'll call your mom, Kip, so she'll know we may be longer than I first thought. We'll check out that house on our way back to your place later."

Larry turned and grinned at me as we went faster. "Oh boy," he said. "It's just like back home."

I could only sit there and shake my head. For thirteen years I'd lived in Grandville, and I'd never had anything to do with a crime. Larry had been in town less than four days, and we were already up to our ears in one mystery for the sheriff, and we were getting set to hear about another mystery from the city police.

Uncle Matt is right, I told myself. He always says that trouble just waits for Larry to come along before it can happen. I decided something more: When Larry shows up, trouble must put on jogging shoes just to keep up with him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As soon as Sheriff Willoby pulled up in front of the police station off Main Street, he jumped out of his car. "You two wait here for me. Or maybe you can look around town awhile." He glanced at his watch. "That's the best bet, I guess. You boys meet me back here in half an hour. I'll call your mom from the station, Kip."

Larry nearly dropped his teeth. "But can't we go in there with you?"

"Nah—this doesn't concern you. This is police business. Meet you back here in half an hour." For a man who usually moved so slow, Sheriff Willoby moved fast. He was up the stairs and into the police station in seconds.

"What a bummer," Larry said, frowning at me.

He looked so surprised and angry that I had to laugh. "Nobody around here knows you're half the police force back home," I said.

"Then I'll have to do something terrific here," Larry told me, reaching for the door handle. I climbed out right behind him, and we walked over to Main Street.

We'd been in town just the afternoon before, but now, without many people and with all the snow, everything

looked different. The plows had finished cleaning the streets, but some of the shop owners hadn't cleared their sidewalks, so the whole town seemed almost deserted in some places. As we stood at the far end of Main Street, I tried to see Grandville the way Larry might be seeing it.

It looked pretty drab and dreary. There were fewer than a dozen shops, and only Louie Bristol's store had a sign overhanging the sidewalk. It said FIVE AND DIME, which shows how old the sign is. Nothing in the store has been that cheap since I was born.

Across the street most of the area was taken up by the courthouse yard, and it was still covered with melting snow. All spring and summer the chamber of commerce had tried to get grass to grow there. The building itself was so old that only landscaping could make the place look halfway decent. Now there was a huge Christmas display plopped right in the middle of the untouched snow. It was a gigantic wooden Santa Claus sitting in a sled driven by seven reindeer. Wooden boxes painted to look like presents were stacked all around Santa. His nose had broken off years before, and he had only seven reindeer because one was still being repaired. The whole thing looked pretty grubby, but all the kids loved it anyway.

"Is that the jewelry store over there?" Larry was pointing at Crandall's, next to the courthouse. The store was small and dumpy, not a bit glamorous like the jewelry stores in television shows. Mr. Crandall himself was small and dumpy. He still hadn't forgiven the ladies' club for erecting a big concrete planter on the street in front of his store. All his customers had to use the courthouse parking area. Mr. Belinski, the hardware owner on the other side of him, was mad about

that too. He was Scooter's dad, so I'd heard him talk about that lots of times.

I glanced at the shops behind us. One was Ben's Clothing, and the two dummies in the window were both bald and had no shoes. Mr. Benson hardly ever fixed special displays, and when he did it took him days. Next to him was a hobby shop, just gone out of business, and next to that was the famous dime store, largest shop in town.

I wondered what Larry was thinking as he looked up Main Street with me. He was probably thinking that Grandville looked pretty crummy. I didn't want to hear him say that. It's okay for me to say it because I live here, but I don't want anybody else saying that. He slapped his arms and whacked his gloves together.

"So? Shall we start out by looking near the jewelry store?"

"What?"

He glared at me. "Aren't you in this with me? Don't you want to try to figure out what happened? Maybe we can find some kind of clue that everybody else missed." He gestured up the street. "This is a nice town with some nice people. They shouldn't have to worry about robberies."

"You *like* Grandville?"

"Well, sure. Don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Makes me think of Ludington. It's not as big here, but the people are almost the same. Like Sheriff Willoby—he's a lot like the coach in our high school. And the kids we saw at the bowling alley yesterday are like the kids back home. I even liked Scooter. My friends and I have arguments, too, but we always get over them. Come on, now—let's check out that jewelry store!"

I ran after him, vowing to stop trying to figure out what he was thinking. He was right about Grandville; it did have some nice people. He was right about Scooter, too. Now I could hardly even remember what I'd been so mad about the day before. "Don't walk on the courthouse lawn!" I yelled to Larry.

He stopped at the street curb. Already the snow there had melted, and the concrete showed through. "What lawn? There's only a bunch of snow all over."

I nodded. "Yeah, but take a look. There isn't a single footprint in that snow. *Nobody* walks on the courthouse lawn. The police were giving tickets all spring and summer if your foot even nudged a blade of grass. We all learned to stay on the sidewalks around here."

Larry glanced at the Christmas display. "Then how did you get that sled out there?"

"Verrrry carefully," I said, grinning. "They dropped it on the lawn using a helicopter."

Laughing, we ran up the walk to Crandall's Jewelry Store. There wasn't much to see there, though. A big board was in back of the broken window, and the doors were locked. There were a lot of footprints all around the building, but nobody was inside the store. We poked around a while, but nothing seemed unusual. "Let's go across the street to the dime store," I finally suggested. "Maybe Louie Bristol can tell us something." This time I beat Larry to the other curb.

As I opened the dime store door, I felt like a little kid again. There was the same mixture of popcorn and perfume, the same smell of candle wax and peanuts that had been there since I was a baby. Going into the dime store was always a treat for me because Mr. Bristol stocked everything from soup to nuts. I could hear a canary singing from the pet area at the back.

Old Louie Bristol has owned our only dime store for about half a century. Mom tells me she thought he was an old man back when *she* was a girl, so he must be old all right. He knows everything that happens on Main Street, too, and he tells everything he knows. "And that's the way it was," he says all the time, and the whole town agrees that he knows what's what.

Mr. Bristol was sitting on a high stool behind his cash register at the front of the store when we walked in. He always sits there because it gives him a clear view of the whole street. The cold air came blasting in, fluttering the papers on his table and freezing a lady who was looking at greeting cards near the door. Mr. Bristol was wearing a big gray sweater but he still looked cold. One time my dad asked him why he didn't move the cash register away from the door so he could be warmer, but he didn't like the idea. "I might miss something important out there," he had said, nodding at the window. Dad and I had laughed on the way home because nothing important had happened on Grandville's Main Street for a century.

But now it had. I wondered if Louie Bristol had finally been rewarded for all his years of watching. Maybe for once he had really seen something. Maybe he was the special witness the radio had talked about.

He looked like somebody special today, too, all straight and alert and eager. "What can I do for you, boys?" he asked. He greets all his customers that way, no matter what the age, just changing the "boys" to "girls" if they happen to be female. I guess he figures he's so old everybody else is just a kid. I'm not sure how he looked when he was young. He's been bald and wrinkled ever since I've known him, and he's worn the same narrow glasses way down on the end of his nose.

He must breathe through his mouth.

"We were wondering about that robbery," I said. "We—"

He bolted forward. "I saw it!"

Larry caught his breath. "The whole thing? You saw the whole robbery?"

"Well, maybe not the whole thing. But I saw plenty."

The lady near the greeting cards moved closer. "What did you see?" Larry asked. "Did you see the thieves?"

Louie Bristol began his long answer. I could never remember all he said, though, because he said so much, starting with what he'd had to eat the night before when he sat down by the window. He said he'd seen Larry and me walk past his store before six o'clock, and he figured we'd been bowling.

Then the storm warnings started coming over the radio, and all the other shop owners went "flying out of town like chickens from a coop when a fox comes in the door." Mr. Bristol said he decided to stay put because he slept upstairs anyway, and he had nothing better to do than sit right where he was and work on a crossword puzzle.

"Anyway, here I was sitting, just minding my own business"—(I smirked at Larry when he said that, but Larry didn't notice)—"and the snow started hammering down to beat the band. Hail, you know. It was dark by six-thirty, and the street was as empty as a pie plate after a Fourth of July picnic. All the lights were on, but not a soul in sight, and the wind started to howl. Then about eight o'clock, I turned off all my store lights. The whole street was black as the ace of spades. Just as I was locking up my front door there in the dark, I saw this car pull up and park in front of the courthouse." He stopped and turned to Larry.

"Can't park in front of the jewelry store, you see,

because the ladies' club got this great big cement planter set up where parking used to be so they could beautify the town. Made Crandall madder than a wet hornet when the mayor gave his okay for that. Belinski had a fit too, but I said to the two of them that—"

"And then what happened last night?" Larry asked. He had to do that a couple more times before we got the whole story.

It turned out that Mr. Bristol had seen two men climb from that car, hurry down the street toward the jewelry store, and disappear into the blizzard. He thought it was so peculiar that he decided to stand and watch what happened next. It was "crazier than a hat on a bull," he told us.

"Pretty soon these two fellows came running down the sidewalk to the street again and hurried over to their car. It was snowing to beat the band so I couldn't see what they carried as they jumped into the car. I heard the car doors slam and saw the car lights flash on. Then they made a great big turn under the streetlight and hightailed it back up Main Street on their way out of town. Yes, yes, I saw it all. I told the boys at the police station the same thing. *I'm* the star witness!"

"Could you see what those men looked like?" Larry asked.

Mr. Bristol puckered his mouth. "Nope, nope, not really. But I did give the boys a pretty good description of the car. I got a good look at it when it was under the streetlight. It was a silver color and—"

"Silver!" Larry gaped at me.

"The car we saw!"

Mr. Bristol stared. "You saw the robbers, too?"

"We saw a silver-colored car turn off Kipper's road when we left town," Larry said.

"It was heading for Amber," I added. "Just after six-thirty."

Mr. Bristol leaned forward. "Well, it was in that courthouse parking space just after eight." He sat back and folded his arms. "I saw the license plate when it flashed under the streetlight. It was from Texas. I told Hank Ewing all about it. I'm the witness everybody is talking about."

He was still beaming, sitting with his arms folded, when Larry and I left a few moments later.

He grabbed my arm as the door slammed shut behind us. "So now we know there's some kind of connection between that store robbery and that old house. Why else would the same car show up in both areas?"

"We'd better tell Sheriff Willoby," I said, but Larry was already running ahead of me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sheriff was standing by the car looking up the street. When he saw us, he waved for us to hurry. "I'm going to take you boys home," he said, urging us into the car. "We'll check out Morgansterne's house later today. Right now I want to—"

"But we saw that silver car last night!" Larry shouted. "And Mr. Bristol said—"

Sheriff Willoby shook his head as he started the motor. "Been talking to Louie, eh? Well I guess you know the story of what he saw, then."

"Yeah!" Larry kept nodding as he talked. "So whoever robbed that jewelry store must have been at the Morgansterne house first. They must have started those fires there. Kip and I saw the car when it was on the way to town. They must have robbed the jewelry store and gone somewhere else for the night. Maybe they're back in that old house right now!"

"No. No, I can guarantee you that they're not there now, son." Sheriff Willoby carefully looked both ways before pulling out on Main Street.

"How do you know that?" I asked. "They might be."

"Morris Parsons called Hank. That's what that radio alert was all about. When he was plowing Kerby Road, he saw a silver-colored car overturned in Kerby's pond. We're pretty certain those two men Louie saw are still inside it."

Larry's mouth fell open. "Kerby's pond?"

"That's on the road next to mine," I said. "Nobody even lives there."

"We figure the driver must have missed your road in the midst of that blizzard after the robbery. On the way back to Morgansterne's, he zipped past your road and turned onto Kerby. There's a nasty curve near that pond, and a stranger wouldn't be prepared for it."

"Mr. Bristol said the license plate was from Texas."

"Hank is checking on that now. Morris had the full number. It's a real pity. Miss Morgansterne has been living in Texas, you know."

"You think she—"

Sheriff Willoby didn't let Larry finish his question. "I doubt that she's involved in anything like that robbery. But we've got to wait until we get that car pulled out before we know who's in there."

My stomach knotted. "You think they're both dead?"

"I'm sure they are, Kip." He sighed and shook his head. "Nobody could have survived a crash like that into Kerby's pond last night. Nobody. If the crash didn't get them, then the weather did. It's too bad, too bad."

I had a sudden memory of how the cold and the wind had bitten into me the night before. "That's awful," I whispered. I guess Larry was thinking the same kinds of thoughts because neither of us said anything. The heater fan was whirling and the sound of the tires plopped along, but we all sat without talking.

Then Larry took a deep breath. "Well, looks as though that robbery is solved."

"Looks that way," the sheriff said. "No doubt we'll find all of Crandall's jewelry right there in the car. He'll have his missing diamonds back in no time."

We were passing by Miss Morgansterne's house then, and all three of us looked at it. It looked bleak and sad to me. The only signs of life were the sets of footprints Larry and I had made when we left that morning at dawn. It was queer, I was thinking. Somebody who was planning a robbery had accidentally saved our lives.

"I want to be at Kerby's pond when the wrecker gets there," the sheriff said. "Later we'll go back to the house and see if there's anything there that Hank might want to use for his case. I'll pick up you two so you can go along with us late this afternoon."

The back of Larry's neck got all red. I knew he wanted to ask if we could go along to Kerby's pond, too, but he didn't have the courage. I didn't either.

"Let's say around four o'clock," Sheriff Willoby said when he stopped in front of my house. "We'll need hours with that car wreck. Tell your mom I'll be back late today."

Larry slumped as the car pulled away. "Come on," I told him, "lunch will cheer you up."

But lunch didn't seem to help at all, even though Larry ate three brown sugar and banana sandwiches. By one-thirty he was pacing our living room like a tiger in a cage.

"I wonder what's going on at that pond!" he kept saying. "Maybe we should go over there and talk to the sheriff."

I'd been trying to pretend that I was interested in a

comic book, but I had been wondering the same thing myself. "We don't have any business going over there, Larry. If we had some new information or something, then we could hike over in order to tell the sheriff. But—"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." Back and forth Larry went. Then he stopped. "Hey! Remember that box of Christmas ornaments we saw upstairs in that bedroom?"

I nodded. "Sure. But what—"

"I just got to thinking. They looked all silvery and glittery. What if there were some *real* jewelry in there too? I mean, maybe those men hid diamonds or something from another robbery right there in that box with the old Christmas decorations. Wouldn't that be something to tell Sheriff Willoby and the police?"

I frowned, trying to remember how that box had looked in the smoky lantern light the night before. "There *were* lots of sparkly things."

"Let's go, Kip. Let's go take another look in that house and then go tell Sheriff Willoby what we find."

"But we told Mom we'd be here while she and Boomer slept awhile this afternoon."

"Oh, she won't care if we go out for a while. We can leave a note. She let Tim and Ted go over to their friend's house, didn't she? Come on, Kip. Let's go."

We were out the door in less than two minutes.

It felt good to be outside again. The sun was warm, and the snow was melting faster. The "diamonds" on the top were turning into puddles.

Larry stood looking around for a moment. "Those drifts of snow in the fields look like the waves on Lake Michigan."

"You're right!" I said, shoving him. "And I've just pushed you in the water!" Then panting and puffing, I ran down the road. Larry and I whooped and hollered

all the way to Miss Morgansterne's house.

When we reached the front, we stood and stared. Except for our footprints leading to the road from the house, there wasn't a sign that anybody had been near the place in years. No smoke came from the chimney. The house was deserted.

"Nobody's here," Larry said. "Let's go look at that box now." He jumped on the porch, then thudded to a stop in front of the door. "Hey, didn't you shut this tight?"

"Sure I did. The lock was smashed but the door latch still caught." I looked over his shoulder and saw that the door was open a crack. "Is there somebody in there, do you think?"

"How could there be?" Larry whispered. "Nobody could be inside. There aren't any other footprints."

"Maybe the latch just gave way."

Larry nodded. "That's it. That's it all right." He opened the door quickly then, but I noticed that he was still whispering.

After the brightness of the sunlight outside, the room was dark and gloomy. I smelled the stale odor of burned lantern oil and the smoky stench of burned firewood, but I could hardly see anything. I stood there blinking and trying to see farther into the room.

Larry caught his breath. He grabbed my arm. "Look!"

I stared at the floor. Larry was pointing to an old yellow newspaper, spread out at our feet. It must have been one of the old papers stacked in the kitchen. My eyes nearly crossed as I stared at the word written in huge letters: BEWARE! It was scrawled in a strange, reddish color.

All the color drained from Larry's face. He stared at me, and his eyes were huge. "That's blood!" he whispered.

CHAPTER NINE

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. It really did. It felt as though an ice cube had been scraped up my spine. "But nobody else could be in here! When we—"

Larry grabbed my arm. "Shhhhh! Listen!"

I willed my heart to stop hammering so that I could hear something else. Faintly, from one of the bedrooms upstairs I could hear someone moaning.

Larry looked as scared as I felt. "What's going on?" he whispered. "Nobody could be in this house except us."

"Maybe someone was here all night." My throat was so tight I could barely squeak. "There's somebody upstairs. Let's get out of here, Larry. Those moans are getting louder."

"But something crazy is going on here. You *know* that nobody was up there last night—nobody was in this house except us. And there aren't any ghosts!" As we talked, color came back to his face. He frowned in his old stubborn way. "I'm going to find out what's going on," he said, inching over to the foot of the stairs. "Who's up there?"

The moans stopped. Then suddenly there was a great

thud as though a heavy body had fallen to the floor. The ceiling over our heads creaked, and bits of plaster fell to the floor.

I was so scared I froze like a statue. All those television shows where people see a monster, scream, and run must be wrong because Larry and I just stood there in frozen silence. I don't think we even blinked. Speechless, we clung to the railing at the foot of the stairs, too terrified to breathe.

Then we heard a sobbing sound.

"C-c-c-crying!" I couldn't keep myself from stammering. "Somebody's up there crying."

Larry stiffened. His whole body was rigid for a moment. Then, just as quickly, he collapsed. "What a couple of dorks we are," he whispered. "Listen again."

I raised my head, and then I realized what he meant. Emotion washed over me like waves on the beach. First I felt foolish, then relieved, and then outright mad.

"Let me handle this, Kipper," Larry said. He started stomping his feet, and he beckoned for me to do the same thing. Then he reached over and slammed the front door. "Good thing you got here when you did, Sheriff Willoby," he shouted. "Kip and I have the thieves trapped upstairs. Better get your gun out so you can shoot them. You stay down here where it's safe, Kipper. The sheriff and I will go upstairs and get those robbers."

He started stomping on the stairs, and he gestured for me to follow behind. "Keep that gun ready," he boomed. By this time we were in the upstairs hallway. One of the bedroom doors was moving. Larry pointed to it, and grinned. Then he shouted, "I'll push this door open all the way, Sheriff, and you start shooting bullets in there."

"No, no, don't do it!" The door flung open, and Ted

stood there, white-faced and wild-eyed, his glasses askew. On the floor behind him, Tim was jumping to his feet. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Go get 'em, Sheriff!" Larry yelled, starting to laugh. "Go get 'em!"

I was howling then, too, almost falling over because I was laughing so hard. Some of it was because Pete and Repeat looked so scared, and some of it was because I had been so scared myself. Strong emotions just have to burst out somehow, I guess, even if they don't seem to make much sense.

"That wasn't funny." Tim was at the door now, too. "You scared us to pieces."

"Didn't you try to do that to us?" Larry jabbed Tim's arm. "I knew it was you guys all along, but Kip here, why, he was as scared as a pig in a pork factory."

"I was not!" My laughter died and I glared at Larry. It's strange how the very same things I like him for at one time can make me hate him at another time. I like his teasing and his jokes, but right then I wanted to sock him. "You were too scared! *You're* the one who saw the 'blood' message."

"Did you really think it was blood?" Tim grinned. "That was my idea. I used an old magic marker I had in my pocket."

"We thought you'd see it later," Ted said. "We put it there for later. But when we saw through the window that you were coming now, we thought up the moans and the body falling."

"So we scared you both, huh?" Tim asked.

"You sure scared Kip a lot," Larry told them. "As for me, well, I was just about this much scared." He made a little distance between his two index fingers, and then he gradually pulled them apart until his arms were thrown out as far and wide as they could go, and

his tongue was hanging out and his eyes were crossed.

Everyone started howling. We were four weirdos in big winter jackets, crammed in the upstairs hallway of a cold, deserted house laughing because we'd all been terrified.

Larry was the first one to get serious again. "But how did you do it? Get in here, I mean. There weren't any tracks in the snow."

"That's right." I stared at my brothers. "We checked it out before coming in. There aren't any new footprints out there."

The twins looked at each other. "Can't you figure it out?" Ted asked. "Aren't you the great boy detectives?"

Tim waved his arms. "We sure don't know how to fly."

Larry walked over and looked out the window at the far end of the hall. "No tracks anywhere around the house. How'd you guys do it?"

"I thought of how we could do it," Ted said.

Tim elbowed him aside. "You did not! I thought of it. We walked backward! We—"

"We stayed in the footprints you made this morning. The tracks you made when you left. We—"

"We walked in them backward," Tim finished.

"We didn't want anyone to know we were in this house," Ted added. "We weren't going to touch anything. Only just leave a scary note."

"The door was unlocked," Tim said quickly because he saw that both Larry and I were frowning. "We didn't hurt anything."

"I don't like it," Larry said, glancing at me. "What do you think, Christopher?"

I was too surprised to answer. Walking backward in footprints—what a neat idea! I never would have guessed that my two bungling brothers could have

pulled it off. I wondered if I could have ever thought of such a smart thing myself and felt disgusted because I doubted that I could have.

Larry was shaking his head. "It's breaking and entering, that's all there is to it," he said. "In Michigan they could go to jail for this. We'll have to report it to the sheriff. It's our duty. I'm a police chief's son, so I know the law. This could be a jail term for the both of them."

Now the twins were too surprised to talk. Some of the triumph had left their faces.

Larry looked over at me. I saw him wink, but the twins didn't. "They probably found the diamonds in the other bedroom and hid them for themselves," he said. "Maybe we can get them for robbery, too."

Ted's eyes grew even wider behind his glasses. "Hey! We never did! We never found any diamonds! We haven't even been in the other rooms up here."

"We never found anything," Tim said. "Where would we put anything?" He held his jacket open.

"Frisk him," Larry said to me. "Looks as though those pockets are bulging. They might be packing rods."

"They're our mittens!" Ted hollered.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or to frown while Larry felt around Ted's armpits. I felt as though I'd wandered into a bad movie by mistake. Was it a horror show or a comedy? Did anybody other than awful actors in terrible old films ever talk that way? I was sure that the twins would see that Larry was just putting them on, but they just stood there looking scared.

"He's clean," Larry said, and then he started in on Tim. He even felt down inside his boots. I wanted to say that checking feet was corny, but I was afraid I'd laugh and spoil Larry's game.

Finally he straightened up again. "They seem okay."

He looked at me, then rubbed his chin exactly the way Uncle Matt always does when he's worried. "Maybe we won't have to report them if they get out of here in a hurry. What do you think, Kip?"

I thought Pete and Repeat would catch on any minute, but I frowned and tried to look wise. "The sheriff said nobody was to come in this house except us. But Mom would be sick if the twins went to jail. Maybe we could forget that we saw them here." A great idea popped into my head. "We can't have even more footprints out there. The sheriff will know people have been in the house. The twins used our old footprints to get in here, so the snow is pretty mussed up around them. They'd better use our new footprints to get out."

I could see that Larry was about to crack up, but he managed to nod without grinning. "Good idea, Kip. They can walk backward in the prints we just made coming in."

Moments later Larry and I looked out the window and watched Ted and Tim hopping from one footprint to another, trying to move along backward. They were wavering and wiggling, their arms outstretched and their faces all serious.

"Serves them right," Larry told me. He jabbed my arm. "But come on—we were going to check that box of jewelry, right?"

"*Maybe* it's jewelry," I said, following him to the last bedroom.

But it was all just junk. Slowly and carefully Larry took out each glittery piece. Some of the bulbs were still wrapped with bits of broken tinsel. But there were no jewels.

"Looks like stuff right out of that old fellow's dime store," Larry said, sighing.

"So now we don't have any big news for the sheriff."

I walked over to the window and tried to see across the fields.

Larry put the last piece back into the box. "Want to hike over to Kerby's pond, anyway?" I could see that he was ready to walk backward all the way there himself, if he had to.

I glanced at my watch. "It isn't quite three yet."

"Would it take very long to hike over there?"

I started for the stairs. "I know a shortcut." We went banging down the steps and out the door together.

CHAPTER TEN

The sun was bright in the west when we started walking. Larry stuffed his cap in his pocket. "Are we going back to the main road?"

"We'll cut across Wainwright's pasture," I said. "That's the shortcut I told you about. Hope we don't miss the sheriff, though. If he leaves now, he'll have to stick to the roads with his car."

The melting snow was piled up high against Wainwright's fence over on our left. Larry held the wire so I could climb between the barbs.

"Seems funny," he said. "Just last night we were hoping that we wouldn't end up in a field, and today we can hardly wait to get into one. These big empty pastures are dangerous in a blizzard during the winter, aren't they."

I jumped inside and reached to hold the wire for Larry. "This field is the most dangerous in spring, summer, and fall," I told him. "It belongs to Count Snort. He's Wainwright's bull, and he's the meanest creature in three counties, including the crazy old boar that the Bishinskys have. Even on the hottest day, my brothers and I don't cut through this pasture to get to Kerby's

pond. When we want to go swimming, we walk all around it and stick to the roads."

Larry shook his head. "*I'd* walk through this pasture. You can bet on that. No bull scares *me*."

"He's faster than lightning, and he could gore you in seconds," I said. "I'm telling you, Larry, that fellow is *mean*. One time Ted thought he was in the barn, so he started through this pasture. Count Snort came running out of nowhere." I pointed to a scraggly tree in the distance. "Ted barely made it to that tree. Snort butted it until it nearly fell over. That tree used to be enormous, but Snort almost killed it. He would have killed Ted too, if Mr. Wainwright hadn't come running."

"No bull would scare me," Larry repeated. "You just have to know how to act around animals. You shouldn't run or scream or act scared. They can smell fear, you know." He bent over to get the snow out of his left boot.

I straightened up, letting the wire zing out of my hand. "Oh no!" I screamed, looking behind Larry. "Here comes that bull!"

Faster than a zooming rocket Larry bolted upright and whirled around. He was halfway to the scraggly tree when his first words came. "Where?" he hollered, terror stricken. "Where?"

"Not scared, eh?" I yelled, grinning. "Just talk to him, eh? Not afraid of old Count Snort, huh? Is that fear I smell—or is it the rubber from the soles of your boots?"

Larry stared at me a moment, then whirled around and started stiffly walking through the field. "That wasn't a bit funny Christopher Dole," he told me. "Not a bit funny."

"Can't take it when somebody plays a trick on you, huh, Cousin?" Still grinning, I walked along behind him. He was mad, I knew, but my joke had been worth

it. It wasn't very often that I could fool Larry. Anyway, I knew he wouldn't stay mad very long.

I was right. We walked along in hot silence for about five minutes. Suddenly he stopped. He whirled around and glared at me. "Besides," he said, "I wasn't running because I was *scared*. I was just wanting to get to that tree so I could check to see if any more bulls were coming so that I could save *you*."

He was trying so hard to look serious that I burst out laughing. He shrugged and grinned. "I didn't think you'd believe me." He punched my arm. "You're a rat! You know that, don't you? A real rat!" He started laughing. "But even rats look okay to other rats. We must be two of a kind. Right?"

"Right." We walked along faster then, and soon we were able to see a mob of figures over by Kerby's pond. There was a wrecker, a police car, the sheriff's car, and a flat-looking silver vehicle glittering in the sunshine. "They're all still there!" Larry said, beginning to run.

Sheriff Willoby was standing near the fence when we came running up. He looked awful, all red-eyed, warm, and wilted. He wasn't wearing his long scarf anymore, and his jacket was hanging open. Off in front of him the tow truck was chained to the silver car. The whole top of the car was crushed, and it was covered with mud and melting snow. The policemen were talking on the other side of it.

Larry and I ducked under the fence. "What happened?" Larry asked.

The sheriff was too tired and weary to even be surprised that we were there. "It's been bad," he said. "We had a rough time getting that car pulled out. What wasn't mud was ice. Chain broke. Truck stalled. Stuck in the mud."

I looked at the wreckage. The front grill was all

smashed in. Both doors were hanging open.

"There were two men in there," the sheriff went on. He wiped his hand across his forehead and left a greasy smudge mark on his face. "Doc said that they were dead before the car hit the pond." He pointed at a gouged maple tree. "We figure they came barreling up Kerby Road, hit a patch of ice, went spinning into a head-on crash with that tree, and then careened into that pond."

I looked at the maple tree again. It was leaning sideways, its middle part all gashed and raw. Now I could see where the tow truck had been stuck in the mud as it yanked the car out of the ice and water.

Larry was looking at the car, too. "They were the men Mr. Bristol saw? Are they from Texas?"

"We'll soon have positive identification. There were two suitcases in there with them. Hank took them back to town when Doc took the men in the hearse. Hank will soon be back with the news." He sighed and shook his head. "What a thing this is. Two men dead. And for what?"

"The diamonds were in there, too?" Larry asked.

Sheriff Willoby heaved another great sigh. He ran his fingers over his head. His gray hair was too wilted to stand up again. "That's the queer thing, boys. That's the queer thing. That car was sealed up tighter than a drum when we pulled it out. Everything that was in there before the accident was in there after it. I guarantee that. The doors were frozen shut, in fact. But there wasn't a single diamond in that car. Not that we've found yet, anyway."

Larry caught his breath. "So they weren't the—"

"Oh, they were the thieves, all right." Sighing again, Sheriff Willoby looked down at the muddy, melting snow by his feet. "We called Elmer Crandall as soon as we found the car. He was here when we opened it.

There was a bag on the front seat with the two men, and it was filled with stuff from Crandall's store. But it was just the junk. The costume jewelry."

Larry scowled. "You mean they put the diamonds somewhere else?"

"We don't know. We just don't know. Louie Bristol saw them run right from the store, down the walk to their car. We know they must have been trying to get back to the Morgansterne place because they had set the place up for the night. But we figured they made a wrong turn and ended up on Kerby Road instead. They *must* have had those diamonds with them when they came barreling up this road."

"But if the diamonds aren't in the car now," I said, "then where are they?"

Frowning, the sheriff looked up at the tree right beside us. Long icicles hanging from its branches were slowly disappearing, and great drops of water were glistening and glittering in the sunlight, ready to drop down into the puddles by our feet. Water splashed on the sheriff's head. He frowned and wiped it off. "Maybe," he mumbled, blinking up at the icicles again, "maybe they just plain melted."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Before anyone could say anything more, we heard Grandville's other police car. "It's Hank," Sheriff Willoby said. "It sure didn't take him long in town. But who's with him?"

It was Louie Bristol, all dressed up in a hunting suit, red cap, and red jacket. I grinned, thinking that the only thing he probably had hunted for during the past thirty years were his glasses.

"You boys find anything out here yet?" he called, climbing out of the car. He looked as excited as Boomer at a birthday party. "I closed my store up so I could come see firsthand what's going on."

The two men sloshing in the mud near the wrecked car shook their heads. They were taking the hubcaps off the tires now.

"We haven't found a blessed thing yet," Sheriff Willoby said.

Chief Ewing shook his head. "Diamonds can't simply disappear."

Mr. Bristol rubbed his hands together. He looked in all directions. "You think they stopped along the road

somewhere? You think they hid the diamonds along Kerby Road?"

"Seems hard to imagine that they would," Sheriff Willoby said. "They were heading straight back to the Morgansterne house, that's my idea. Hadn't they set it all up? I think they planned to get there and split up what they'd taken from the store. Seems to me they'd keep the diamonds until they got there, divide everything, and then leave town."

"But not go back to Texas," Chief Ewing said. "We've identified both of them. They both have records there. The younger fellow was a Morgansterne." He turned to Sheriff Willoby. "Miss Morgansterne's great-nephew, I guess. Sounds like a wild one. He gave them a merry chase in Texas. That was her car, by the way. She reported it stolen. The license plate had been changed, but that's her car all right."

The sheriff sighed. "A nephew, huh? So that's why he knew about that old house. Maybe they planned to stay awhile. The kids said they'd brought in some soup."

"Could be. I suspect Morgansterne and his buddy were hightailing it north as fast as they could go. They probably thought they could stay a night or two in that house on the way."

"After robbing Elmer's store!" Mr. Bristol blurted.

Chief Ewing shrugged. "Hard to know when or even if they planned to rob on their way north. It might have been a spur of the moment thing that they robbed Elmer's store. Harvey Rork, over in Amber, says that two men showed up and ate in his restaurant during the worst of the blizzard last night. It was these two, I'm sure of it. When they left Amber, they must have noticed that Grandville was deserted because of the storm. Maybe they decided right then and there to rob

the store because nobody was around to see them."

"*I* was," Louie Bristol declared.

"Yeah." Chief Ewing grinned. "They didn't know about you."

"Your fellows find anything in town?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothing. We've searched all around that store and every inch of that sidewalk to the curb." Chief Ewing looked back down Kerby Road. "They must have hidden those diamonds somewhere between here and town."

The sheriff scowled. "But why would they do that?"

"Who knows?" Chief Ewing shrugged. "You got any other ideas?"

"Maybe they went to Morgansterne's house first," Mr. Bristol said. "Maybe they hid the diamonds in that house."

"But Kip and Larry were there," Sheriff Willoby told him. "They were there before the store was robbed, and they spent the whole night. They said nobody came near that house."

Louie Bristol's face fell. He looked at Larry and puckered his lips. "Well, *he's* not from around here. How do we know he's telling the truth?"

Larry jerked back. "What? Me? Why, I—"

Sheriff Willoby laughed. "Oh, he's all right, Louie. I'll vouch for him. Come on—let's check that trunk now. Did they take that spare tire out yet?"

As the three men walked way, Larry snorted. "Did you hear that? Mr. Bristol thought that *I* might be involved in that robbery! Maybe *he's* the one! Maybe those men gave him the diamonds for safekeeping and they were going to pick them up later. Now he's got them all for himself."

I laughed out loud. "Louie Bristol a robber? Could

never happen, Larry. He couldn't ever keep from telling everybody exactly what he'd done." I looked at the muddy clearing. "Maybe the sheriff was right—maybe the diamonds melted. Just like the ice is melting."

"That's a crazy idea."

"But ice and diamonds look a lot alike," I said. "Just think how it might be for someone from outer space or something. If they had to choose between the two, they might have a hard time knowing which was valuable. They wouldn't know that ice disappears."

Larry frowned. "Well—so did the diamonds."

"But you don't get what I mean! I mean—"

"If somebody came here from outer space, they probably wouldn't think either one was very valuable, if you ask me. Maybe on *their* planet, diamonds are a dime a dozen. Besides, if you're dying of thirst in a desert, the ice *would* be more valuable. And—"

"Oh, just forget it, Larry." He looked all serious, with his green eyes squinted in concentration.

"I got better things to do anyway," he told me. "I'm going to search every inch around here. Dad always says I have a special knack for finding things. If there's a diamond within two miles, *I'll* sniff it out."

But neither of us found anything at all. Half an hour later, the tow truck pulled away, dragging the mangled silver car behind it. Chief Ewing waved, then his men drove off in their car. Tires spluttered, and there was the smell of car exhaust. Twilight had turned to dusk, the ground had turned to mud, and our high hopes had turned to dust.

"What I don't understand is this," Louie Bristol said. His face was nearly as red as his cap, and he kept nodding his head as he spoke. "When them fellows left town, it was snowing like the dickens! Why would they take a chance stopping somewhere in that blizzard? No

sir, it doesn't make a lick of sense!"

"We'll have to search the road all the way between here and town," Chief Ewing told the sheriff. "You handle the search at the old house. See if there's anything at all there that might help us. For all we know, a third person was involved in this thing. Maybe there's a clue in the old house."

He turned and beckoned Mr. Bristol back into his car. "Too late and too dark to do anything more tonight." He sounded tired and discouraged, and his uniform was splattered. "We'll get at it first thing in the morning. Lordy, lordy, what a job! Finding those diamonds will be like finding a needle in a haystack." He mumbled a few more words, then climbed into the car and drove off with Mr. Bristol.

Slumping, the sheriff looked around the deserted circle. "Come on, boys," he muttered. "I'll give you a ride home. We'll start in on the Morgansterne place first thing in the morning."

"We'll find those diamonds," Larry said, climbing into the front seat. "Don't worry about that. I'll figure out where they are."

The sheriff only sighed. It sounded as though Larry was promising a lot more than he could ever deliver. I looked out the window as we drove toward the main road. There was a lot of space between Crandall's Jewelry Store and Kerby's pond.

You'll never do it, Larry, I wanted to say, but I sat back in the seat and said nothing. I'd had lots of experiences with Larry, and I could never be absolutely sure what he might or might not do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I'll pick you up at eight-thirty tomorrow morning," the sheriff said as we left the car. "We'll search that house from top to bottom. Get a good night's sleep. I want you rested and bushy-tailed tomorrow." The car motor made a knocking sound as he pulled away.

Larry and I were just turning around to start up the drive to my house when an awful thought hit me. "That note! He'll see that crazy note my brothers put there!"

"This note?" Larry asked, pulling a yellowed piece of newspaper out of his pocket.

"You took it?"

"Sure. I didn't want anybody else seeing it. I took it when we left there this afternoon."

I relaxed. "Nice having you around, Cousin. You think of everything."

"Wish I could think where those diamonds might be hidden." We plodded up the driveway to the house. "Yeah," Larry said again. "I'd sure like to find those diamonds."

"Don't sprain your brain trying," I told him. "The world will keep right on turning whether you find them or not."

"But I'd enjoy the ride a lot more if I could come up with an answer."

I jumped up the steps. "Face it, Larry—some questions just plain don't have any answers."

As soon as we stepped into the shed, I smelled spaghetti. I could hear Boomer banging his tray in the kitchen, and I could hear the television blaring upstairs. Suddenly I felt hungry and tired, glad to be home. "Let's forget it awhile, Larry. Let's just forget it."

Mom was hanging up the telephone when we walked into the kitchen. We tossed our boots back into the shed. "Good news, guys," she said. "The men will be here tomorrow."

Larry straightened. "You mean Dad's coming tomorrow instead of Christmas Eve?"

"Seems that he finished early. He called Kip's dad in Kansas City about his flight, and they'll meet at the airport tomorrow noon when Dad's finished his business. They'll both be here in time for dinner tomorrow night."

"Wow!" Larry turned to me. "We've got to get to town again. I still didn't get Dad's Christmas present."

"Oh, you'll have plenty of time for that," Mom said. "Christmas is still four days away, and we'll all have errands in town. You can hike to the woods tomorrow and pick out a tree for us, too. We'll put it up day after tomorrow." She turned and looked at me. "What's going on with the twins? They got home a few hours ago and they've been as quiet as mice ever since."

Larry glanced at me and grinned. I shrugged. "Didn't they tell you where they'd been?"

"I thought they were at the Wainwrights' house, but they've hardly said a word. Do you suppose they had an argument with Billie the way you did with Scooter?

Honestly, you boys! And where were you two? Your note wasn't very clear."

I was trying to come up with an answer when Boomer started yelling. "Better get the twins now," she said, handing Boomer a roll. "You can tell me everything while we eat."

As soon as Pete and Repeat saw us, they knew we weren't going to tell Mom where they'd been that afternoon. Suddenly the "quiet mice" turned into the usual howling hyenas. When Larry and I finally finished telling everybody what had happened at Kerby's pond, the whole kitchen was in an uproar.

"Are you sure those diamonds weren't in the car?" Ted asked.

Tim glared at us. "How could they be gone? Where'd they go? Who took them?"

Mom was more interested in the people. "Poor Miss Morgansterne! She told me about that nephew a long time ago. He was in prison then, I think. What a pity! I'll write her a note tonight. So *they're* the ones who lighted those fires in her old house. I'll have to tell her that—"

"You almost saw the robbers!" Ted cried.

"Maybe the diamonds are in that house, too," Tim shouted.

"No." Ted poked at his glasses. "Remember this afternoon when we—"

Just then Boomer spilled his milk, so he never got to finish. It was a good thing. If Boomer hadn't spilled his milk, Ted might have spilled the beans. I knew Mom would have had a fit if she knew the twins had gone into that house. By the time we had everything cleaned up again, nobody was talking about Morgansterne's house and where the twins had been.

"Louie Bristol thought Larry had hidden the dia-

monds," I told everybody. "He said Larry looked suspicious because he wasn't from around here."

Larry shook his head. "What a guy! I told Kip I suspected that he hid the diamonds himself."

"And put them right on his jewelry counter in the dime store," Ted said. "Wouldn't that be funny? Diamonds in the dime store!"

We were still laughing about that as we finished the dishes. Larry kept thinking of ways the diamonds could fit right into the regular dime store stuff. A diamond-studded dog collar was the twins' favorite product.

Larry and I fell into bed early that night. I lay trying to sort out all that had happened, but everything was blurring together in my mind because I was so tired.

"Kipper." I could faintly hear Larry calling me from the other bed. "We've got to find those diamonds before my dad gets here. I've decided that I want to do that as a Christmas present for him."

"You're crazy," I mumbled, putting my pillow over my head. "He'll be here tomorrow. Tomorrow night. You don't have enough time."

"There's time. I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it somehow."

"It's impossible." I closed my eyes. "Those diamonds are gone. They melted."

I don't know whether Larry answered that or not. The last sound I heard was Boomer jabbering away in his crib across the hall. But even as I fell asleep, I knew Larry would be lying there thinking about those melted diamonds and how he might still find them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was pitch dark when I felt hands grabbing at me. For a second in the darkness, I couldn't think where I was or what was happening. Then I realized that Larry was shaking me.

"Kipper! Wake up! I know where they are!"

"What? What're you talking about?" As I sat up, the cold air of my bedroom swooped in at me. Larry was outlined in the dim light of my clock radio. He was wearing his heavy jacket. "What's going on?"

"Shhhhh! You want to wake up everybody in the house? I knew I should have gone without you! But I need a flashlight. Get your clothes. Let's go."

Suddenly I was wide-awake. "Go where?"

"To find the diamonds, Kip. I know where they are." Larry threw my jeans at me. "At least I *think* I know where they are."

"Are you crazy? It's two o'clock in the morning."

Larry's fingers wrapped around my mouth. "If you don't shut up, I'll go alone. Are you coming or aren't you? If you're not coming, tell me where I can find a flashlight. If you are coming, then get dressed. And be quiet!"

I started pulling my jeans up over my pajamas. "But how—"

"It was the strangest thing, Kip. I was sound asleep dreaming that I was in that old house down the road and—"

"Are the diamonds there? At Miss Morgansterne's? But—" My words were buried as I pulled my sweater over my head.

"No, not there. Will you keep quiet and listen? I'm trying to tell you. I was dreaming about that old house, and how Tim and Ted fooled us when we went in there. Then my dream shifted to Mr. Bristol and how he saw the robbers leave that jewelry store and carry the diamonds off. Then just like that, I was wide-awake, and I knew where the diamonds were hidden."

I had just zipped my jacket. I stood there with my fingers still on the zipper, tempted to unzip it and climb back into bed. "That's it? For that dumb dream you want to go traipsing out somewhere in the middle of the night? It's probably below freezing outside. How far do we have to go?"

Larry laughed. "To town."

"To town?" I tried to whisper, but the words shrieked out louder than I meant them to. I fell back on my bed. "To town?"

"Is there an echo in here?" Larry asked.

Shaking my head, I sat up again. "Let me get this straight, Larry. You had a dream about where those diamonds are, and now you want to walk all the way to town in the middle of the night in the freezing weather on the chance that your dream might be true?"

"It was more than a dream. And it's not freezing. The TV said it wouldn't go much below forty degrees tonight."

"But it's nearly three miles to town!"

"You got something better to do with your time?"

"Well, I *was* thinking about sleeping."

"Anybody can sleep at this hour," Larry said. "Only special people get to go out in the night and come up with a fortune in diamonds."

"Where are they?"

"You'll have to come along in order to find out. Where do you keep a flashlight?"

"But couldn't we just go get them tomorrow?"

Larry sighed. His voice was low in the dim darkness. "Dad comes tomorrow evening. *Both* our dads. Wouldn't it be neat if we had already found the diamonds when they got here? We can't go searching in the morning—we have to meet the sheriff. And by the afternoon somebody else may have found them. Wouldn't it be a great Christmas present for our dads if they came into town and found that we were big heroes?"

"Me? A hero?" My voice cracked. I just never think of myself that way. I always think of myself as stumbling along in the back row of a big parade, but Larry always imagines himself as leading the whole band, beating a big brass drum, and waving a baton as he marches. "But what if they aren't where you think they are?"

"Then nobody will ever know, see? If we're quiet enough going out, nobody will know we went looking for them. If we don't find them, then we can be back before anybody wakes up, and nobody will ever know we looked for the diamonds and failed."

"The flashlights are in the top kitchen drawer," I said. "And we'll have to be extra quiet going past Boomer's room. If he hears us, he'll wake up Mom for sure."

"Then you'll go?"

"I guess so." I stood up. "Craziness must run in our family."

As we stepped out into the hallway, I touched Larry's arm. "Be careful of that third step. It creaks if you put your weight right in the center."

"So you've done this before, huh?"

I didn't answer his question. I let him think that I had crept down those stairs in the middle of the night before, but that wasn't true. I knew the step creaked because once Ted told me he always waited to hear it at night when Mom or Dad or I went up to bed. He said he liked the sound of it, and as soon as that step creaked, he fell asleep.

In seconds I had two flashlights from our kitchen drawer. We tiptoed across the linoleum, struggled into our boots in the shed, and went out into the night.

Outside it was dark and damp, with no sign of the moon or stars. The wind was hardly blowing, and it wasn't very cold. There was a moist stillness; the air felt heavy. I zipped up my jacket. "You'd better be right about this weather, Larry. If we get halfway along this road and another blizzard hits, we'll really be in trouble."

We started hurrying toward town. The snow was mushy under my weight, and my feet sank into mud. I kept looking back to be sure no light flashed on in the house behind us, but it stayed as black as the night. I sighed, thinking of the long walk ahead.

"Sure you can't tell me where you think those diamonds are?" I asked.

"Nope. I want you right near them when I tell you. Besides, if I don't tell you, maybe you'll figure out the answer yourself."

I scowled. "I doubt it. They could be anywhere, as far as I'm concerned. You say the whole thing came to you while you were asleep?"

"Guess so."

"I wonder if you can trust a dream?"

"It wasn't a dream."

"What was it then?"

Larry paused. For a few moments we walked along in silence, with only the sound of our boots. Then he mumbled, "You'll think I'm crazy."

"Try me."

"It was a voice. Kind of like a voice."

"That's not so crazy. Mom talked about hearing voices in her sleep when Boomer was a baby. She said there were two voices, and they argued. When Boomer cried in the middle of the night, one voice would say, 'Get up, your baby is hungry,' and the other voice would say, 'Go back to sleep, you're tired.' I guess lots of people hear voices in their sleep. With Mom it was like having two people inside her head."

"Three."

I slowed my steps. "Three?"

"Sure. One was listening to the other two voices. Right?"

"Oh boy," I said. "And how many voices did you hear tell you where those diamonds are hidden?"

"Just one."

"Oh boy," I said again.

"You can always go back home, you know. Go ahead—go on back home. I'm okay by myself."

I took a deep breath. I could lie in bed at three o'clock in the morning for the rest of my life, I thought, but this might be the only time I could ever be off searching for diamonds with Larry. "I'm staying," I said. I started running. "In fact, I might even beat you into town!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

But nobody ever beats Larry anywhere. When we raced around the bend heading for Main Street, he was a long way ahead of me. It seemed strange to see the whole town so dark and deserted. In the distance I saw the neon light on the bank: 34°, 3:15.

Except for the blinking colors of our town's only stoplight, there wasn't a sign of life. A few street lights were swinging in the blackness, but they barely made a flicker in the dark. It gave me a hollow, sad, lonely feeling to see how Grandville's busiest street looked—as though everyone I had ever known or cared about had packed up and left for another world.

"Hurry up, Kipper!" Larry called softly. Up ahead he was jumping off and on the curb.

"Okay," I panted as I reached him. "What now? You kept telling me all the way into town that you'd explain once we got here. Let's hear it."

"We've got to walk up this way." Larry waved his arm at the dark street ahead. Piles of snow stacked up by the snowplow glittered eerily in the faint glow of the overhead lights, but most of the sidewalks were bare.

"See, the thing is, Kip, we were all fooled. Just like

when Tim and Ted fooled us in that old house. There were footprints leading in there, but we didn't see them because they weren't turned the way they were supposed to be. I got to thinking about that—I mean, those footprints were invisible because they weren't what we expected. People only see what they expect to see."

"So?" He was pulling me along as he talked. We crossed the side street and were on the block with the jewelry store just ahead. I looked over at the dime store far ahead on the other side of the street. I half expected to see Louie Bristol's face pressed against the window of the dime store, but his shop was as dark as all the others.

Larry was walking faster. "I got to thinking—if we were fooled by *not* seeing what we expected, then maybe Mr. Bristol was fooled by thinking he *had* seen what he expected."

"What?" I could hardly keep up with Larry physically, and I was really lost mentally.

"I got to remembering how people can be fooled by seeing or not seeing just what they expect to see, and I got an idea," Larry said. "We keep thinking that those two men were equal partners and that they planned to share and share alike. But what if they weren't? What if one wanted to fool the other? What if the one who scarfed up the good jewelry decided to keep it all for himself? Maybe he decided he'd hide the diamonds and come back and get them when he was alone later."

"But how could he do that? They went right from the jewelry store to the car. Mr. Bristol saw them. And the car went off Kerby Road just two miles from here. So how could one man hide anything from the other without being seen?"

"Supposing the man with the diamonds got rid of his bag on the way to the car? If the partner was driving, he might not even notice right away. They could barrel

out of town, supposedly going back to Miss Morgansterne's to split everything. Maybe the one man thought he could leave his partner there and sneak back to get all the diamonds for himself. What could the partner do? He sure couldn't call the police!"

We were right at the door of the jewelry shop now. We turned and looked out toward the street. I stared at the empty blackness and suddenly felt nervous. If a police car pulled up now how could we explain what we were doing? I sighed. "But Larry—every inch of this path ahead has been searched. Remember? Nothing was found. And there isn't a single place where anybody could hide diamonds on the way to the parking area. Louie Bristol saw—"

"What did he see?"

"He saw two men come running down the sidewalk and over to where their car was parked."

"Did he? Did he really see that? Or was it snowing so hard he couldn't tell what they were doing? I think he told everybody what he expected that he would see. He said the two men ran down the sidewalk and over to their car."

"Well, that's all right. That's the way people get from the jewelry store to their cars. Nobody—"

"Nobody from around here cuts across the courthouse lawn. You already told me that. But those men wouldn't know about that! I think one of them ran across the lawn through the snow. His footprints would have been hidden in no time the way that blizzard was blowing, and the sheriff just hasn't thought about that yet."

"But even if one man did run across the yard, what could that matter? It's just a big empty space. You can't hide anything in plain sight on a public lawn." I looked over at the courthouse yard. Santa's sleigh and his seven reindeer were silhouetted in the dim light. "Hey,"

I said, beginning to get an idea, "maybe—"

"In my dream a voice started asking questions," Larry was saying. "Where could somebody hide something that wouldn't be noticed by anybody right away? Where could you hide a bag that might fit right in, even if somebody did happen to notice it? Where—"

"The sleigh!" I grabbed Larry's arm. "Let's—"

Larry yanked me back. "Wait. Wait a minute, Kip."

He sounded so serious, I stopped. "What's the matter?"

"I just want to wait here a minute more. It's nice thinking that I might be right about finding those diamonds in there. But I might be wrong."

"Nah!" I laughed and shook my head. "This time I *know* you're right, Cousin. I *know* it!" I was shouting now, but I didn't care. Let the whole world hear us! "I *know* it!" I hollered again. I gave him a yank, and we both were running like crazy people over to the sled.

The big statue of Santa Claus sat in the middle of a dozen wooden boxes painted to look like presents. We jumped up on the sleigh's edges and flashed our lights inside. There were boxes and boxes and—and a dark bag lying at the bottom of the sleigh. Larry flung his flashlight aside and reached for the bag. When he pulled it open, I flashed my light in. A thousand lights glittered back at me like ice crystals gleaming in the sunlight.

"The diamonds!" Larry whispered. "It's the diamonds!"

Merry
Christmas

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I guess I'll never forget the big celebration we had that night. By then we were finished in town, and even Dad and Uncle Matt had talked to Chief Ewing and Sheriff Willoby. The whole family was sitting around our big kitchen table talking. Dinner was almost over.

"All I know is that I'll never recover from the shock of seeing that gang here in my kitchen at five o'clock this morning," Mom said. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw those kids standing there in the shed with Hank and Ed. I thought they were sound asleep upstairs."

"I opened the door when the sheriff knocked," Ted shouted.

"Well, I was right there behind you," Tim told him.

Dad laughed. "And to think all this excitement happened on the only three days I've left this farm in years."

"It's because of Larry," I said. "Things always seem to happen when he's around."

We all turned to look at him then. Mom had fixed a special place for him at the head of the table, with crepe paper streamers hanging from his chair and a big bow

on his place mat. We were eating in candlelight so our kitchen would look "festive" as she called it, and Larry was grinning in the flashing shadows.

"So how does it feel to be a big hero?" Dad asked him.

Larry crossed his eyes and made a slight bow with his head. "Well, first of all, I'd like to thank my cousin Christopher, who made it all possible, and my aunt who allowed it to happen, and the pilot who brought me here, and, of course, Boomer, who encouraged me, and—" By then we were all laughing because we saw that he was going to talk on forever, just like the people do on television shows when they get a big award.

"Well, Kipper played a big role here, too," Uncle Matt said. He was sitting next to Larry, and I was right beside him.

"I held the flashlight while Larry did the work," I said.

"Whatever it is that you do, it seems to get results." Uncle Matt reached out his long arms and ran a hand over Larry's head and mine too. "I'm proud of these kids. The police would have found those diamonds soon, no doubt about it, but our kids found them first. And they took them directly to the station. I'm proud of them both. Whoever had a bigger Christmas present than what we got today?"

"I wonder if we'll ever know what really happened?" Mom said.

Uncle Matt shook his head. "Probably not. Hank Ewing has some good ideas, though. The reports from Texas are all the same—that Morgansterne fellow was a tough customer."

"I bet he was the one who tried to cheat his partner," Larry said.

"Could be. Hank thinks that one of them planned to take off with the car later that same night, pick up the diamonds, and leave the other one stranded in the old house. Morgansterne had a history of stealing cars. If he pulled a double cross, he probably thought he'd steal another car on his way north."

"He was lucky he had such a neat place to hide those diamonds," Mom said. "He must have dropped them in that sleigh in a hurry."

Dad nodded. "Ed told us that he never thought about that Santa display. When Louie said he saw the men run down the sidewalk, everybody just assumed that's exactly what they did."

Ted reached over and tapped Larry's hand. "Did the police give you a ticket?"

Larry frowned. "A ticket to what?"

"A ticket for stepping on the courthouse lawn," Tim told him. "You know—when you ran over there to look for the diamonds, you must have stepped on it."

"Nope," I said, "we didn't get a ticket. But while we were in town, we did get two big bags of jellybeans that we might share with you guys."

Ted leaned forward. "From who?"

"Take a guess," I told him, but everybody was already shouting out the answer. "Mr. Bristol said he guessed he'd made a little mistake about what he saw. Maybe Larry is okay even if he isn't from around here."

"What a day!" Larry looked over at me. "We started it with diamonds from Santa's sled, and we're ending it with jellybeans from the dime store. What could be better than that?"

"Milk!" Boomer yelled. "Milk! Milk! Milk!"

"Give the boy some more milk," Uncle Matt said, as

everybody laughed. "He needs to grow up to be as strong as his brothers."

"And as smart as his cousin Larry," Larry added.

There wasn't any doubt—Larry's first visit to Kansas had turned out to be terrific.

GONE WITHOUT A TRACE

So far Larry's visit to his cousin Kipper in Kansas has not been packed with excitement. But all that changes the night of the big snowstorm. Larry and Kipper get trapped walking home from the movies and are forced to take shelter in the abandoned old Morgansterne house. Except that the house *isn't* abandoned–blazing lights and a burning stove prove that someone has been there...and may be coming back!

The next morning everyone in town is talking about the big jewelry store robbery the night before. A fortune in diamonds has disappeared just like snow that has melted away. But Larry and Kipper think the Morgansterne house may hold the key to the "melted" diamonds...and soon they're smack in the middle of an investigation that solves the mystery and saves the day!

AVON CAMELOT

PUBLISHED BY AVON BOOKS

008-012

9780380898657
2016-03-04 8:48

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ISBN 0-380-84865-1